

ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S

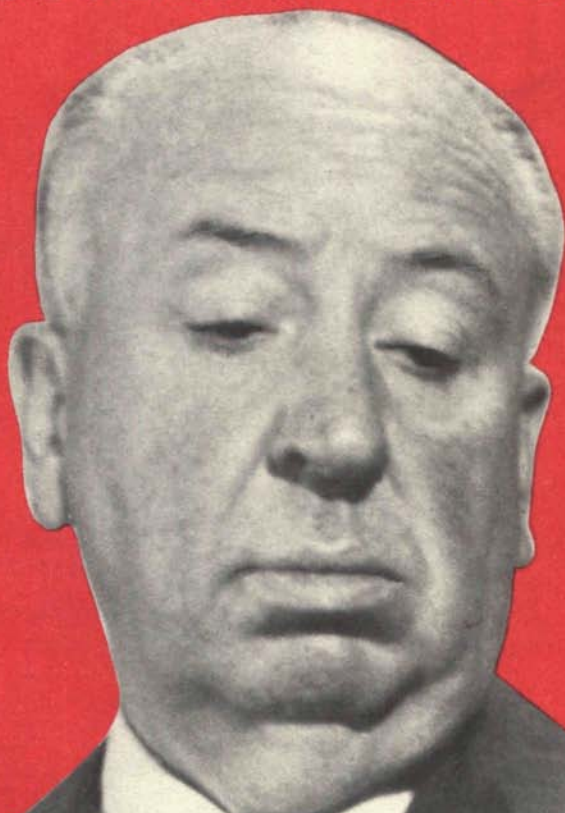
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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NEW stories
presented by
the master
of **SUSPENSE**

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May 1975

Dear Reader:

Inflation has hit the professional killer. The very price of cement is a burden, and costs are up, I hear, on brass and lead, cutlery, and piano wire. The price of arsenic is stomach-wrenching, and that of nitro is skyrocketing.

While a number of assassins are in danger of being laid off, none of this affects my bringing you a careful selection of new mayhem every month, but I thought the above worthy of mention should there be a contract out on you. Heave a sigh of relief.

In this issue you will find the traditional methods of relieving overpopulation, as well as free use of strong hands and the tried and true system that is so useful—nay, mandatory—in certain commitments: the wooden stake and mallet.

Enjoy them all, from *Bedlam at the Budgie* by Jack Ritchie to a novelette of intrigue in Italy titled *Free-Lance Operation* by Bill Pronzini.

Good reading.

Alfred Hitchcock

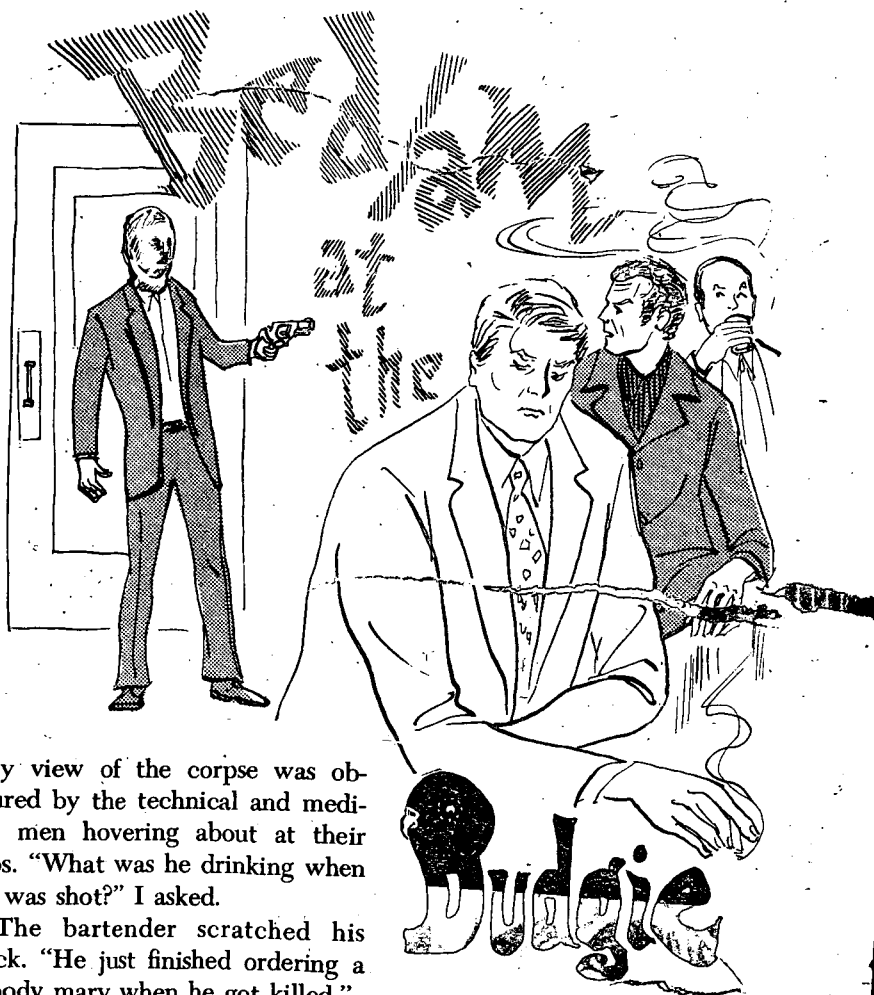
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The corpse on the barroom floor is cause for more consternation than any picture of Madeleine.



My view of the corpse was obscured by the technical and medical men hovering about at their jobs. "What was he drinking when he was shot?" I asked.

The bartender scratched his neck. "He just finished ordering a bloody mary when he got killed."

Budgie

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE Vol. 20, No. 5, May 1975. Single copies 75 cents. Subscriptions where \$10.00 (in U.S. funds) for one year. Published monthly by H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 784 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fl. 33408. Copyright H. S. D. Publications, Inc., 1975. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright convention. Title registered U.S. Pat. Office. Reproduction or use without express permission of editorial or pictorial content in any manner is prohibited. Postage must accompany manuscripts if return is desired but no responsibility will be assumed for unsolicited material. Manuscripts and changes of address should be sent to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 84 U.S. 1, Suite 6, North Palm Beach, Fla. 33408. No similarity between any of the names, characters, persons and/or institutions appearing in this magazine and those of any living or dead person or institution is intended and any similarity which may exist is purely coincidental. Printed in the U.S.A.

My partner, Ralph, joined us just as the bartender retold his story. "It was a little after three this afternoon and the door to the street opened and this man stepped inside. He had a woman's stocking pulled over his head and he yelled, 'McGeorge,' and then he shot that man on the floor."

I indicated the body. "Is his name McGeorge?"

The bartender's eyes flickered. "I don't know what his name is."

"Then he wasn't a regular customer?"

"I never saw him before in my life."

Ralph had the victim's wallet. "His driver's license says he's

by Jack Ritchie

James E. Cullen, 173 Courtwood Apartments, and his birth date makes him forty-two years old."

I regarded the seven other witnesses to the crime. "Is there a McGeorge in the house?"

They looked at each other, but none of them came forward.

I frowned. "Why would the killer call the victim McGeorge, if he isn't McGeorge?"

The bartender shrugged. "After he shot this man, he turned and ran out. And then this man here,"

he indicated one of the witnesses, "pulled out a gun and chased after him."

Dave Campbell, one of the department's newer officers, had been off-duty having a drink, when the killing occurred. He was still rather pale. "I never saw anybody killed before."

Ralph nodded sympathetically. "You chased the killer?"

Dave nodded. "It all happened so fast. I mean I wasn't expecting anything like that. I was sort of shocked. Like everybody else. But then I came out of it and took after him. When I got to the door, I could see him ahead down the block, just about to duck into the alley. I got off one shot before he disappeared."

"Did you hit him?" Ralph asked.

"Not exactly. But I'm sure I creased him."

"Creased?"

"Well, I could see my slug chip off a piece of the building beyond him, but I think it creased him on the way past because he sort of jumped before he disappeared and put his hand back here." Dave indicated his own posterior.

"Ah," I said, "The *gluteus maximus*. Right or left?"

"I think it was both. Not through, you know. Just creased."

A technician joined us for a mo-

ment. "Six shots were fired. Four missed Cullen. One got him in the left arm and the other right through the heart."

Dave continued. "By the time I got to the alley he was out of sight. The alley leads to another one that runs up and down the block. I looked around, but I couldn't find him. He was about medium height and on the thin side."

I turned back to the bartender. "What's the name of this place? The Red Budgie?"

"Blue Budgie."

The Blue Budgie was a nightclub, but at this time of the afternoon only the street bar was open.

"Who's the owner?"

The bartender quickly pointed to one of the witnesses. "Ask Mr. Wister. He's the manager."

Wister came forward rather slowly.

"Who *does* own this place?" I asked.

"A corporation."

"What corporation?"

Wister seemed to sigh. "The Ajax-Helot Corporation."

Ralph drew me aside, out of the earshot of the others. "Henry, Ajax-Helot is Big Joe McGeorge, and Big Joe McGeorge is Ajax-Helot. And either one of them means *syndicate* in this town. In other

words, Henry, the killer got the wrong man. He was after Big Joe McGeorge."

"Oh," I said, "*that* McGeorge. But the killer shot Cullen?"

"It was dim in here and he came in off the sunny street. He couldn't see too good, but he couldn't just stand there, holding the gun and with that stocking over his head waiting to get used to the light. So he yelled, 'McGeorge,' and when Cullen turned, the killer shot him."

I went back to the bartender. "Why didn't you tell me the killer meant Big Joe McGeorge?"

He nervously wiped the bar top with a rag. "I don't know nothing from nothing. I just work here."

I returned to Wister. "Was McGeorge here today?"

"Well, yes."

"When?"

"This afternoon. He came in at about two-fifteen."

"Does he come here at that same time every day?"

"No. He'll show up maybe once a month to check up on things and have a drink."

"When did he leave?"

"Around three. About five minutes before the shooting. I let him out the back door."

"Why the back door?"

"It was closer to the parking lot where he'd left his car."

"Did he come in the back door too?"

"No. The back doors are always kept locked and we probably wouldn't have heard him if he knocked. He used the front door to get in."

Ralph had been thinking. "Since McGeorge doesn't seem to have a regular schedule about coming here, the killer must have been following him. He saw McGeorge go in, but he didn't see him leave."

I was inclined to agree. "We'll have to question Big Joe McGeorge for possible leads to the killer's identity."

Ralph pulled me into a corner again. "Henry, the killer don't have no identity. What I mean is, he's a hit man and McGeorge wouldn't know him from Adam. This is syndicate business and we never have any luck solving syndicate hits. Like Lorenzo Thomas found dead in the trunk of his car last year."

"But we've got to at least *question* McGeorge."

"Sure. But let me do the talking."

Ralph and I finished taking the statements of all the witnesses, plus that of another customer who had been in the washroom at the time of the shooting. Then we got into our car and left to inform

Mrs. Cullen of her husband's death.

At the Courtwood Apartments, I pressed the buzzer beside apartment 210.

A striking woman with ample black hair, narrow dark eyes, and a generous, but controlled, figure, opened the door.

"Mrs. Bernard Cullen?" Ralph asked.

"Yes."

We identified ourselves and Ralph said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you, Mrs. Cullen."

She regarded us for a moment or two more and then invited us in. When Ralph finished telling her what had happened to Cullen, she dabbed with a tissue at what appeared to be a perfectly dry eye, and then took further consolation in a cigarette.

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "was your husband a wealthy man?"

Ralph looked a bit pained.

Mrs. Cullen raised an eyebrow. "Bernie? He had his job and that was that."

"No life insurance?"

"He had ten thousand."

"And you are the beneficiary?"

"No. His mother is. Bernie wanted to see how our marriage worked out before he committed himself."

"How long have you been mar-

ried to Bernie?" I asked her.
"Three years."

Ralph had been fidgeting. "Mrs. Cullen, we have reason to believe that your husband was killed by mistake."

While he explained that part of Cullen's death, I glanced about the room. There was only one bookcase and that was used as a room divider. It did not contain a single book; just ceramic elephants and things of that sort. Deplorable.

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "did your husband frequent the Pink Budgie regularly?"

"Blue Budgie," Ralph said.

She shrugged. "I never heard of either place before. Bernie took a drink now and then, but he wasn't a regular anywhere. When he felt like a drink, he just dropped into the nearest place."

"Did he have any nicknames?" I asked.

"Nicknames?"

"Yes. Beside Bernie, I mean. Like Muscles, or Shorty, or McGeorge, for instance?"

Ralph looked at me. "Who would have a nickname like McGeorge?"

"You'd be surprised," I said. "I had a friend in high school whose nickname was McGillicutty. Her real name was Hildegard."

"No," Mrs. Cullen said, "every-

body he knew called him Bernie."

"Did Bernie have any enemies?"

"None that I know of."

"Mrs. Cullen," I said, "do you wear a wig?"

Ralph closed his eyes.

"No," she said. "All of this is my own."

Ralph handed her one of our cards. "If there's anything we can do for you, just call this number."

Downstairs, I said, "It occurred to me that the killer might have been a woman disguised as a man. If Mrs. Cullen wears a wig, that means she really has short hair and could pass off as a man."

Ralph regarded me with some pity. "Henry, do you really think for one minute she could really pass for a man? With a *built* like that?"

"Actually, I was about to ask about that next."

Ralph drove us, somewhat reluctantly, I thought, to Big Joe McGeorge's residence on the lake-front drive.

We were stopped at the entrance by a closed gate and our credentials were examined by a uniformed guard before we were allowed to continue. We followed the usual winding drive until we again saw daylight at a gravel oval in front of the main building, which was situated on a bluff

that overlooked Lake Michigan, vaguely outlined Acropolis.

A male servant led us to a large room in which the ceiling was a considerable distance from the floor. Ralph and I were left to wait.

Ralph took out one of his cigars, studied it, and then apparently decided that igniting a fifteen-cent cigar in a room like this was not entirely appropriate.

I wandered to some wall bookshelves. The contents proved to be standard classic, uncut, and no volume younger than 1914.

I sat down beside the phone and counted the number of McGeorges in the directory next to it.

Ten minutes passed. Fifteen. Twenty.

I rose and wandered off into the adjacent rooms and halls in an effort to discover human life.

In another large room I paused before the marble fireplace. A huge ethereal painting of a young woman hung above the mantel.

She appeared to be in her early twenties, clad in something resembling a Grecian gown. For my taste, her brown eyes appeared a bit too close together. In the background a number of man-goat mutations danced and piped enthusiastically and, in the far distance, the viewer was given a glimpse of a cloud-shrouded

Behind me, a woman's voice said, "Ah, so you've fallen in love with her too, haven't you?"

"Well, no," I said. "Frankly I haven't even come close."

I turned and looked at a girl, also in her early twenties, but blue-eyed, with amber hair, and wearing rather large glasses.

She frowned up at the painting. "*Everybody* falls in love with her."

"Who is she?"

"Dora."

"Dora who?"

"Dora McGeorge."

Big Joe McGeorge strode into the room, flanked by two remarkably husky men. An older, faintly perspiring man followed in their wake.

McGeorge appeared to be of about average weight and height. He stopped when he saw me, glanced up at the portrait, and smiled. "So you've fallen in love with her too, eh?"

"Actually, no," I said. "Her eyes are much too . . ."

He chuckled. "*Everybody* falls in love with Dora." He turned to his entourage. "Isn't that right, boys?"

They gazed reverently at the painting and nodded. I had the distinct impression they were not faking it.

"I'm sorry I kept you waiting," McGeorge said. "But I had to wait for my lawyer. Can't go anywhere or say anything without a lawyer these days." He indicated the perspiring man. "This is Hannigan."

Hannigan wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I got here as fast as I could, Joe."

I noticed that the girl had disappeared; and where was Ralph? I thought he might have wandered after me, but evidently not.

We all took seats.

"All right," McGeorge said, "let's get down to business. To save you trouble, I'll tell you that Wister phoned and told me all about what happened. That's why you're here, aren't you? The killer yelled 'McGeorge' and you put two and two together?"

"Do you have any idea who might want to kill you?"

He appeared shocked at the very thought. "Me? I'm a friend to everybody and everybody's my friend. I got no enemies. None in this world. It must've been some other McGeorge he was after."

I nodded. "A possibility which has not escaped me. There are eighteen McGeorges listed in the telephone directory for this city and suburbs. None of them is you."

"My phone's unlisted. Keeps the

house much quieter that way."

"Why are you called Big Joe? You seem about average size to me."

"It's one of those things that gets passed on. Before me there was Big Max, Big Sig, and Big Arnie. Arnie was only five-foot-two."

"Do you spend much time at the Brown Budgie?"

"Blue Budgie. No. Why should I?"

"But you own the place, don't you?"

"So I own it. And I got a manager there to run it for me. Besides, the Blue Budgie isn't the only place I got. There's at least a dozen—"

Hannigan pulled urgently at McGeorge's sleeve and McGeorge stopped.

"However, you were at the Blue Budgie earlier today? At about two-thirty?"

"Sure," McGeorge said. "Me and Eddie and Freddie." He indicated the two burly men with him. "I checked over the books, then we stopped at the bar for a drink. But we left before the shooting."

"Eddie and Freddie are your bodyguards?"

"Friends. I never go anywhere without them."

"Are they armed?"

He responded to a sleeve tug

from Hannigan. "I wouldn't know. I don't pry into their personal business."

"It occurred to me that some outside syndicate might be trying to move into town."

He glowered at the thought. "I been making phone calls, but there's nothing in the air. Absolutely nothing." He ignored the sleeve pulls. "If anybody was trying to move in, I'd know about it."

"There is another possibility," I said. "Suppose this is an *inside* job, so to speak. Somebody inside your organization wants to take over."

Hannigan's chair tipped over backward and he fell to the floor. He rose immediately, his face white. "Not me, Big Joe. I don't know anything about administration. I wouldn't even *think* of anything like taking over. Never, Big Joe. I swear it on my mother's mausoleum."

McGeorge frowned at him. "I never even thought about you for ten seconds."

"Mr. McGeorge," I said, "as long as I'm here, I'd like to review another matter—the case of Lorenzo Thomas. He was found in the trunk of his car last year. It appeared that he'd been there for three weeks or more. Somebody passing the garage on a hot day

smelled something suspicious and called the police. I understand that Lorenzo was a member of your syndicate."

McGeorge snorted. "Member of the syndicate? He was a bowling machine repairman and when something went wrong at one of my lanes, we gave him our business. Every time somebody turns up in the trunk of a car, you right away yell 'syndicate.' Personally I think his wife did it. I asked around. They fought like cats and dogs. She never even reported him missing. And why would she take a taxi to and from the supermarket for three weeks when their car was right there in the garage?"

"Why didn't you take your suspicions to the police?"

"Me? Why should I get involved? I'm a taxpayer. Why should I do your job for you?"

When I left McGeorge and his associates, I ran into the amber-haired girl again in the hall. She undertook the task of guiding me to the front door.

"By the way," I said, "what is your name and status around here?"

"I'm Dora McGeorge."

I stopped. "You mean that the girl in the painting is supposed to be *you*?"

"More or less."

"But her eyes are too close together. Besides, they're brown and yours are blue."

"Dad had the painting commissioned when I was only six months old. It's a projection of what he thought I'd look like when I grew up. When I was sixteen and tried my first and last martini, I got a ladder and painted glasses on Dora. Also I changed her eyes to brown. Dad had the glasses cleaned off, but he thought brown eyes looked nice and left them that way."

We resumed our journey to the exit. "Do you have a spare stocking?" I asked.

She blinked. "Why?"

"I'd like to put it over my head. It's an experiment. I'd go out and buy a pair, but I think that's spendthriftly, considering that I wouldn't be using them for more than a minute or two."

She studied me. "How did you ever get on the police force in the first place?"

"There was this appeal for applicants and my father thought that I ought to get into something worthy instead of reading all the time. But I've really enjoyed police work, except for that time when I had to deliver twins."

She led me to a small room and stepped behind the cover of a sofa. She removed one of her

stockings and tossed it to me.

I slipped it over my head and peered about. My vision was a bit impeded, but not too much. However, the room was quite light. "Pull the blinds, please," I said.

She hesitated. "I don't know if I should. You're a weirdo."

I moved into the shadow of an alcove instead. There was now some difficulty in seeing. I took off the stocking.

"Don't you travel in pairs?" Dora asked. "Like nuns?"

"Nuns don't travel in pairs anymore. Unless they happen to be going to the same place, of course, and then it could be triplets, or more."

"I mean detectives. Police officers."

I snapped my fingers. "I knew I'd forgotten something."

We retraced our steps and found Ralph standing enrapt before the painting of Dora.

"Ah," I said, "so you've fallen in love with her too, eh?"

He nodded. "Who is she?"

"Not of this world," I said. "She's beyond reach."

Ralph sighed. "Dead, huh? Well, maybe it's better that way. There's nothing like reality to louse up a dream." His mind returned to duty. "When the hell is McGeorge going to see us?"

"It's already happened," I said.

"I'll tell you about it in the car."

On the way back to the city, I told him about my meeting with McGeorge.

"I'm not so sure that syndicate comes into the picture at all," I said. "McGeorge doesn't think so either."

"That's what you'd expect him to say." Ralph rubbed his chin. "You actually think that Cullen's killing might not have been a mistake? But who would want to kill him?"

"There's Mrs. Cullen."

"Like I said once before, she could never pass off as a man."

"Probably not. But couldn't she hire or persuade somebody to do the job for her?"

"What would be her motive? Money? There's the ten thousand insurance, but the beneficiary is Cullen's mother. Maybe Mrs. Cullen had ideas of taking the thing to court? After all, she's his wife and she could claim that he just forgot to get his insurance beneficiary changed."

I shook my head. "Besides the uncertainty of a favorable court decision, I don't think there's really enough money involved to tempt her to murder. At least not enough insurance money."

"But Cullen didn't leave anything else."

"That's what she implied, but

do we have to believe her? Doesn't it strike you that a man as monetarily cautious as Cullen would also be the kind of a man who *saved* his money too?"

"So maybe he left money. But would his will probably leave that to his mother also?"

"If there is a will. Of course his wife could contest it with a good chance of winning at least a sizable compromise. However, the litigation might drag on for years and lawyers' fees would take their toll of the estate. No, the happiest thing for Mrs. Cullen would be if Cullen died intestate. Without leaving a will. That would automatically make her the heir. So if there is a will, it would be to her interest to find and destroy it as soon as possible."

"She might have done that already."

"I don't think she's had the chance yet. Being such a cautious man, I think it's a good bet that Cullen has the will, if there is one, in his safe-deposit box. And since he did not have enough confidence in his wife to make her his insurance beneficiary, I doubt very much if he provided her with a key or that she even knows where it is."

"Suppose she found the key and destroyed the will *before* arranging for Cullen to be killed?"

"A strong possibility. After all, killing a man on the speculation that you *might* find the key to his safe-deposit box and *might* be able to destroy a will which *might* exist, is tenuous at best. Which brings us to another possibility. Mrs. Cullen could conceivably have had nothing at all to do with her husband's death. This, however, might not prevent her from taking advantage of his demise by destroying his will."

At headquarters, we dropped in at the morgue and talked to the attendant in charge. "Do you still have Bernard Cullen's personal effects?" I asked.

He brought out a large brown envelope and opened it. I went through its contents and found a small flat key—obviously for a safe-deposit box.

"We almost missed that," the attendant said. "Cullen kept it in his sock. There's a callus shaped like the key on the ball of his right foot. Another thing. His wife just called. She wanted to know when she could pick up his personal effects. I told her after you were through with the case."

"Good. Don't let anybody have any of Cullen's things until I give the word. Especially not that key."

Ralph and I walked back to the elevator.

"At this very moment," I said, "I suspect that Mrs. Cullen is tearing apart her apartment looking for the duplicate of that key."

Ralph blinked. "Duplicate? I never thought of that. Sure, there'd be a duplicate for something like that. Suppose she finds it?"

"I don't think she will."

"Why not?"

I smiled. "I think his mother has it."

I got home to my apartment at six. Usually I make my own meals, principally because I detest dining out, but also because I am the only person who knows what, how, and when I want to eat. I put together my favorite casserole—chopped dried beef, mushroom soup, peas, and chop suey noodles—shoved it into the oven at 350 degrees for thirty minutes, and then ate.

When I finished my milk, I reached for the phone, but then remembered that the McGeorge number was unlisted.

I showered, shaved and transferred my personal possessions to my best suit, then drove to the gates of the McGeorge estate.

The gatekeeper phoned ahead and Dora opened the front door herself. "I felt strangely chilly this afternoon and I finally realized that you've still got my stocking."

I removed it from my pocket. "I discovered it when I got home. I would have phoned you not to fret, worry, or become generally despondent. I would have mailed it back. But your number isn't listed and it takes a court order to get the telephone company to release those things, so I thought I might as well return it myself."

She led me to one of the rooms off the hall. "I suppose you're off-duty? Would you care for a drink? Bourbon, whiskey, rum?"

"Well . . . perhaps a small glass of sherry."

She regarded me for a moment. "All right."

She found the bottle after an extensive search of the liquor cabinet. "My father told me all about what's been going on. He always does. With the exception of certain business matters. He doesn't want me to have to lie if I ever have to get on a witness stand."

She poured two glasses and handed one to me. "Dad doesn't think the killing of this Cullen had anything to do with the syndicate. *Any* syndicate. Do you?"

"I have my doubts. If this was a syndicate hit, the killer would have to be a professional, right?"

"Right."

"Would a professional fire six shots and miss four times?"

"Never. But I suppose the light was bad?"

"I think a professional would have anticipated the situation and made allowances instead of suddenly appearing in the doorway with a stocking over his head. And if this was a professional job, wouldn't the killer have been provided with all pertinent information about his target, including the fact that he had an escort of two bodyguards?"

"Absolutely."

"Then would a professional killer wildly fire six shots, leaving himself with an *empty* gun in the face of those two armed bodyguards? And then there's the getaway itself. It might not be mandatory to have a car waiting—preferably with a driver and a running motor—but making your escape on foot seems to be a little chancy, doesn't it?"

Dora agreed. "And that bit about the killer shouting 'McGeorge.' What was really the point of that as a means of identification of his victim? I'll bet *everybody* at the bar turned around. It's just normal to turn around when somebody opens a door and yells 'McGeorge,' or 'Attila the Hun,' or anything. Even if your name is Smith or Bluebeard."

"Exactly. Therefore we come to the conclusion that it was only the

killer's *intent* to make the incident seem like a syndicate killing. But he really wasn't after McGeorge at all."

"Cullen?"

"It bears thinking, doesn't it?"

"Would you care for another sherry?"

"No, thank you. I'd like to keep a clear head. I still have to drive back."

Before I left, at ten, I learned, among other things, that while at college she had been elected Miss Bookworm of 1972, an honor achieved when the Reference Room crowd voted for her *en bloc*.

Back in the city, on impulse, I drove on to the Purple Budgie, or whatever. I left my car in a parking garage and walked the half block to the nightclub. A poster in front indicated that the current featured singer was one Amy Adams.

I opened the door to the bar. The room was now considerably crowded, smoke-ridden, and humming with a blend of noise. In the background, beyond the bar, I could hear a band and a woman in combat with a song.

I raised my voice and shouted, "Suleiman the Magnificent!"

A dozen or so souls nearest the door turned, looked amused, confused, or shrug-shouldered, and

then returned to their drinks.

Wister, the manager, had evidently been within earshot. He approached me. "Did you say something about Kubla Khan?"

"It's funny how people confuse the two," I said. "I guess that's because Kubla Khan is more familiar, so people have a tendency to transpose, even if they aren't at all alike."

"Would you like a table?" Wister asked.

I was about to refuse, but he added, "It's on the house, of course."

"Well . . . my feet are a bit tired."

He led me through the bar to the main room and found a small table near the service doors. Certainly not the choicest table in the house, but adequate. He appeared about to sit down with me, but changed his mind. "What would you like to drink?"

"A glass of sherry, please."

He relayed my order to a waiter and still lingered. "Have you any idea who the killer might be yet?"

"We're still working at it. Did you know the victim, Cullen?"

"No."

"Did you know his wife?"

He frowned. "His wife? Why should I know his wife when I don't know him?"

"One thing doesn't necessarily follow the other."

"I haven't even the faintest idea of what she looks like."

"Is it common knowledge that McGeorge owned this place?"

"I wouldn't say exactly common."

"Would the employees here know?"

"I imagine so. Though probably not the customer who comes in off the street."

He went off to greet a pair of customers.

My sherry arrived and I tasted it—really cooking sherry. It's surprising how often that happens to me.

The other chair at my table was pulled back and a man sat down. "Hi," he said. "How's the murder business?"

He was in his middle thirties, quite flashy, and he had been drinking some or more. His face seemed familiar.

Ah, yes. He was one of the witnesses to Cullen's murder. No, not actually a *witness*. He had been in the lavatory when the murder occurred. Roberts? Romer? Rodell? Yes, that was it. Rodell.

On the small spotlighted stage, Amy Adams renewed her clutch on the microphone and breathed into a new number.

Rodell took the cigar out of his

mouth. "She's got a terrific voice, right?"

I listened carefully for half a minute. "Actually her voice is quite thin. However, if she is really musically inclined, I'd suggest that she take up an instrument instead. I knew a girl in high school who switched from mezzo-soprano to the harp and never regretted it. Hildegard was her name, though most people called—"

"She's my wife."

"Hildegard? I didn't even know she was—"

"I mean Amy Adams." He indicated the stage.

Adams? Rodell? Oh, yes. Adams was her stage name. I cleared my throat. "On the other hand, a lot of people *like* thin voices. Perhaps even a majority. How long has she been booked here?"

"Three months."

I chuckled. "At least she has a steady job. I suppose you have to give some credit to her manager?"

"I'm her manager."

I sipped my sherry. "Did you know that Big Joe McGeorge owned this place?"

"Sure."

"Were you acquainted with the victim? Cullen?"

"Like I told you this afternoon, I never saw him before."

"Did your wife know him?"

"Why should my wife know him?"

"I mean perhaps she doesn't exactly know his name, but she might have seen him here some night? With another woman?"

"I don't think so."

I excused myself and went to the men's room. It had only one small opaque window, probably leading to the alley. I tested the bars latticing it. Really quite solidly imbedded in the framework, there seemed to be no possible way to remove them without causing extensive damage.

I frowned. Rodell had said he had been in the lavatory during the killing, but was it necessarily the *men's* lavatory? After all, there had been no women in the barroom, so the women's powder room must have been empty. Rodell could easily . . .

I exited and paused at the door of the women's powder room. Was there anyone in there now?

I waited five minutes. I was just about to push open the door when two women marched out. They stared at me in passing.

I decided to wait another ten minutes before making another attempt to enter the room.

Four minutes passed and three women swept past me and entered the powder room.

I began timing from zero again.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and found at my elbow a large tuxedoed man, possibly a bouncer.

"Why are you staring at that door?" he asked.

I laughed lightly. "I was waiting for my wife to come out, but I guess I missed her. What did you think I was doing?"

"I'm afraid to guess."

I left him and went to the bar. The afternoon bartender was off-shift, but there were three others on duty now and all of them busy. I finally got the attention of one of them. I raised my voice above the din: "Pardon me, but I'd like some information. Have you ever been in the women's powder room?"

He cupped his ear. "Huh?"

"I'd like to know how many windows the room has, how big are they, are they barred, and if they are, what is the general condition of the bars."

He looked pained. "I never been in the women's john in my life, mister. All I do is mix drinks. Order something I know."

I sighed and decided that the information I wanted might better be obtained by other means. Possibly I could ask some woman, or simply wait until tomorrow when the place was less crowded and I could see for myself.

I rejoined Rodell at my table.

"So you're a manager? I suppose you have other singers and entertainers in your . . . ah . . . *stable*?"

"Just Amy." He took a long pull from the drink he'd ordered while I was gone.

I listened to Amy Adams conclude another number. Yes, her voice was unquestionably thin. Did she have a personality? A flair? She appeared lean and lank to me, with neutrally short brown hair. Did others see something I didn't?

I saw Wister standing next to a wall with apparently nothing to do at the moment. I excused myself and approached him. "Does the women's powder room have a window?"

He gave it frowning thought. "I think so. But to tell you the truth, I don't ever remember being in there. Why do you want to know?"

"I'm certain that the killing had nothing to do with the syndicate. The killer was an amateur, so to speak, and he wasn't after McGeorge at all."

"After Cullen? But he shouted 'McGeorge.'" He rubbed his jaw. "A diversion? He knew McGeorge was here, or at least he thought McGeorge was here? He had seen McGeorge enter the Blue Budgie?"

"If he did, then why did he wait forty-five minutes before going in and shooting Cullen? No, the killer waited forty-five minutes until he was certain that McGeorge and his bodyguards would *not* be there. He couldn't risk any one of them drawing a gun and shooting back in the confusion of the event. Unfortunately, from his point of view, he did not know that an off-duty policeman was at the bar."

"He saw McGeorge leave?"

"Yes."

"Then he must have been watching the back of the building?"

"No. If he followed McGeorge in the first place and saw him entering the front of the building, logically that's where he could expect him to exit. But McGeorge and his friends left by a rear door. The killer couldn't have known that McGeorge was gone if he'd still been out in front. Therefore, I come to the conclusion that he was waiting neither in the front of the building nor the back."

"Then where was he?"

"Right here in the barroom of the Plaid Budgie."

"Blue Budgie." Wister's eyes rested on Rodell still at my table. "Rodell said he was in the lavatory. But could it have been the women's . . ."

I nodded. "The men's lavatory window is solidly barred. I don't know about the window in the women's powder room, but I suspect that Rodell slipped through it, ran around to the front of the building, shot Cullen, and then doubled back to reenter the building the same way he'd left."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"I can't find a motive," I said. "Why did he kill Cullen? And there's something else nagging at my mind, though I can't put my finger on it at the moment."

I returned to my table, leaving Wister to examine the powder room should the opportunity present itself.

Rodell watched me sit down again. "You'll never find the killer. He's probably a thousand miles away by now."

"It wasn't a syndicate killing," I said. "And the killer wasn't after McGeorge."

Rodell appeared to let the information sink in. "I just thought of something. Suppose McGeorge did the shooting himself? What better alibi could he have, so to speak, then to walk in and yell 'McGeorge,' like he was really looking for McGeorge, and then shoot Cullen? The last person the police would think of would be McGeorge himself."

I stared at him. "If he wanted

Cullen dead, he could easily have somebody else do the job for him. And what reason could he have for wanting to kill Cullen?"

Rodell shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe it was something personal and he wanted the pleasure of doing the work himself."

I drummed my fingers on the table. That *was* a new element.

Rodell took a long swallow from his glass. "It could have been me."

"What could have been you?"

"I could have been lying there on the floor instead of Cullen. That was my bar stool. I just finished my drink and had to go to the can. Cullen must've come into the place while I was gone and took my seat." His face paled at a new thought and he spilled his drink. "Why would McGeorge want to shoot me?"

In the background, Amy Adams was at it again. Damn it, didn't the woman know when to quit?

I watched Rodell use a handkerchief to wipe the drink from his coat and trousers.

I closed my eyes for a moment and then rose. I searched for and found Wister.

"Have you come up with a motive?" he asked.

"Yes."

"You're going to arrest Rodell?"

"I might have before, only

where did he get the extra pair of trousers?"

"Extra trousers? What trousers?"

"As the killer was making his escape, Officer Campbell creased his posterior with a bullet, no doubt destroying the seat of the trousers, not to mention the shorts, and possibly inflicting some physical damage as well. The killer would have required the immediate facilities of a washroom, some bandages perhaps, and certainly another pair of trousers. He could have skipped the shorts, I suppose, since it was an emergency situation. Now, where could Rodell have gotten those extra trousers in a hurry?"

Wister cleared his throat. "There's a washroom adjoining my office. And he could have stolen the pants from my office."

"But he couldn't have worn them. He's a quite heavy man. The trousers would have been an obvious misfit and we would have noticed." I smiled. "Would you care to sit down while we talk about this further?"

He seemed a bit grim. "I prefer to stand."

I almost pointed. "You, sir, escorted McGeorge and his bodyguards out of the rear door. You waited until they were out of sight, then you ran around to the

front of the building, shot Cullen, and returned to your office at the rear of the building. There you quickly attended to your posterior, changed pants, and joined the horrified customers a few moments before the squad cars arrived. The room was dim and for all anybody knew, you had been there in the background throughout the entire incident. Nobody counted noses. Besides, everyone, including the police, automatically assumed that it was an outside job. There appeared to be no reason to suspect anyone inside the building."

"This is ridiculous," Wister snapped. "What possible motive could I have for killing Cullen?"

"But Cullen's death really *was* an accident. Your intended victim was Rodell, but the light was bad. You probably didn't even know you'd shot Cullen instead until later. When you last saw Rodell, he had been sitting on that particular stool and you expected him to still be there when you came in the front door."

"And what reason could I have for wanting to kill Rodell?"

I smiled. "No matter how you slice it, Amy Adams has a voice utterly without distinction. Yet you've kept her here for three months. Usually an entertainer is booked for a week or two and then moves on. Why have you

kept Amy Adams for so long?"

"None of your business."

"I suppose you haven't disposed of the gun, torn trousers, and *et cetera* yet, especially since you felt quite safe? Cullen was the victim and no one could possibly connect you with him?"

"I demand to see my lawyer."

I nodded: "And I suppose Amy Adams will need one too? She's your accomplice, isn't she? After we grill, interrogate, question, hound, and humiliate her, I imagine the truth will come out."

The gentleman in him came to the fore, as I suspected it might. "She had absolutely nothing to do with this. It was my idea entirely. Rodell is a lush and a leech, but she wouldn't leave him." He sighed and looked longingly at a nearby chair. "I sure wish it were possible for me to sit down. I've been on my feet all day."

At nine the next morning, I bought a cigarette lighter and went to the nearest phone booth. I put through a call to Dora

McGeorge with some trepidation.

"How did you get my number?" she asked.

"I just happened to notice it on one of your telephones the last time I was there. I called because I just discovered that I accidentally pocketed your cigarette lighter when I left yesterday."

"It can't be mine. I don't smoke."

"Your father's?"

"He doesn't smoke either."

"Hannigan? Freddie? Eddie?"

"Nope."

"You mean I spent \$12.50 on a cigarette lighter that nobody's going to claim?"

"I'm afraid so. On the other hand, if you'll look in the right-hand pocket of your suit, you'll find one of my very favorite book-marks and I haven't the faintest idea how it got there."

"I'll have it dusted for fingerprints."

"That won't be at all necessary. Just return it and no questions asked."

I was there in twenty minutes.



When everything seems to be in one's favor, perhaps he should have second thoughts.

Wrong Diagnosis

by
Patrick O'Keeffe

The motive for murder, which the Coast Guard investigators failed to uncover, was generated on the day before the *Marea* sailed from Lobos. After returning aboard from a round of golf under the fierce tropical sun, Captain Webbin lay down on his settee for a brief rest. Suddenly his head was spinning and he was gasping for breath, with crushing pain across his chest. The seizure was short, but when the chief mate knocked and pushed aside the doorway curtain, the captain's breathing was labored, distress still showing on his sun-reddened face.

The chief mate stared at him in alarm. "I'll get a doctor." He turned to rush off, but the captain stopped him.

"No—no!" he gasped. "I'm—I'm all right, Mr. Brady. Just a little touch of heat exhaustion."

The chief mate regarded the captain uncertainly. Mr. Brady was a big man with a broad tanned face and sunken dark eyes, powerful hairy arms extending from a short-sleeve khaki shirt. "It looks like something worse than that to me, Cap'n. Better let me phone the hospital for a doctor."

The captain shook his head petulantly. "I'm all right, I tell you. I came over dizzy all of a sudden. Get me a shot of brandy. That'll fix me up quick."

The chief mate took a bottle and a glass from the little locker under the glass-paneled bookcase and poured a stiff hooker. He handed the glass to the captain, and then held his shoulders up from the pillow while the captain almost emptied it. "I came in to tell you the coffee's coming in fast. We'll be finished loading by midnight and ready to sail."

"Fine!" The captain gulped down the rest of the brandy and handed back the glass. "That's fixed me up already."

Returning the bottle to the locker, the chief mate said gravely, "You ought to take it easy for a while."

"I'll do that, Mr. Brady. But keep this to yourself. I don't want it to get around that I'm maybe under the weather. You know how these rumors get blown up. I don't want the passengers made nervous."

Mr. Brady nodded and went out. Captain Webbin stared up dismally at the deckhead. He was in no doubt that what he had just suffered was a heart attack. He bitterly regretted those two hours of golf with the chief engineer. He'd overexerted himself this time.

The captain burned with sudden anger. Why did the chief mate have to come barging in at that

critical moment? Brady hadn't been fooled by the bit about heat exhaustion, or his reason for wanting it kept quiet. Brady's remark that it looked like something worse was proof. During his experience in helping to doctor crew members, the chief mate must have come across a heart seizure or two and would be able to recognize the symptoms. Brady would make sure that word of this one would get to the marine superintendent. That would mean only one thing.

The prospect of being retired on a small disability pension filled Captain Webbin with wrathful desperation. It meant a miserable existence in a furnished room somewhere. The wife he had married as a young Marine before he joined the merchant service was dead, and there had been no children. He was happy with life aboard ship—only forty-five and in command, the companionship, a fresh group of passengers to mix with on the *Marea's* monthly voyages to Caribbean ports, twenty more years of such pleasant living to look forward to, then a worthwhile pension. All that was now in the power of one man to wreck.

Captain Webbin spent the entire evening in his cabin, having his dinner brought up, determined

to give his heart every chance to recover. Toward sailing time, he examined his narrow face in the bathroom mirror. He was of moderate build, with fleshy jowls and a waistline he had struggled to keep within bounds ever since the start of the anginal pains a year ago. His face was still a fiery red. He wondered if it had been showing white, tinged with blue, perhaps, when Brady had barged in—additional symptoms for him to recognize?

A few minutes before midnight, Brady came in to report all lines singled up in readiness for letting go, the ship prepared for sailing. "Still feeling OK, Cap'n?"

"Just fine," the captain replied. "No more golf under a blazing sun for me," he added, keeping up the pretense in order to note Brady's reaction. "It's my first dizzy spell, and I'm not risking another."

"You'd be wise not to, Cap'n. I'm glad it didn't get worse. I was kind of worried about you this afternoon."

Captain Webbin went out to the bridge, cynical about the chief mate's reply. As the line's senior chief mate, Brady was next in turn for a command, but short of an unexpected resignation or a death, he would have to wait for the next captain to reach retire-

ment age, about five years hence. A captain suddenly forced to retire on a disability pension would mean instant promotion for Brady—scarcely anything to be worried about.

Shouting orders from the little docking platform, which jutted out from the bridge to provide a clear view fore and aft of the ship's side, Captain Webbin fretted under a sense of bitter frustration as he maneuvered the ship away from the wharf. Ever since he first noticed the shortness of breath and anginal pain after exertion, such as climbing up from a hold at the end of an inspection, he had followed the advice given in the Ship's Medical Guide and reduced his physical effort to a minimum and guarded against excessive emotional disturbance.

To hide his condition and give an impression of physical fitness, he bought a punching bag and dumbbells and made a pretense of exercising vigorously every morning, making plenty of noise with the punching bag, for effect, behind his closed door. Perhaps he should have sought expert medical advice instead of relying on the Guide; his heart trouble might then have cleared up. He could have gone to a private doctor instead of a company doctor, who would have been obliged to report

his condition to the marine superintendent.

After maneuvering his ship out of the little coffee port of Lobos, Captain Webbin set her on a course along the coast toward Esmeralda, her final loading port. He left orders with the officer of the watch, the second mate, that he was to be called when the Cape Aguila light was sighted, and then went to his cabin and turned in.

He lay awake speculating about Brady. He considered pleading with him to keep silent about his heart attack, admit that it was that and not heat exhaustion, but it would be asking too much. Brady had everything to gain by refusing. Even if the chief mate had nothing to lose by remaining silent, he was the kind who'd speak up on principle, from a belief in the line's policy of requiring physical fitness in its captains, to avoid having one collapse during an emergency at sea.

There was only one way out, Captain Webbin grimly decided. After planning it, he fell into a restless sleep with renewed hope for his future. He'd go to a specialist and get the best advice. The line didn't require physical checkups without cause. He'd take extra precautions to make sure that he'd not have another attack.

Captain Webbin was awakened at four a.m. by the standby sailor. In the gloom of the cabin, the open portholes were dim circles against the blackness beyond, out of which came only the low sound of the bow waves curling into surf over the quiet sea. There was no hiss of rain or approaching squall to foretell need to take shelter in the wheelhouse. The weather, at least, was favorable for his plan.

The captain presently sat up, and his head started going round. He feared another attack was coming on, but the dizziness passed; he put it down to a carry-over from the afternoon. He heard the second mate come into the adjoining chartroom to write up the rough log before going below to his bunk. Having to turn out again in a couple of hours for docking the ship, the second mate hadn't lingered to chat with the chief mate on the bridge. That was another favorable circumstance.

Swinging his short legs over the edge of the bunk, Captain Webbin toed for his slippers and switched on a shaded desk lamp. Pulling his khaki trousers up over his pajamas, he stepped into the chartroom. The second mate had already gone below, leaving it in darkness to protect the night vision of the men in the wheelhouse

against the opening of the connecting door. Captain Webbin groped toward it, and closed it again as he passed through into the smell of percolating coffee.

Mr. Brady's deep voice came from the direction of the store's locker. "'Morning, Cap'n. Coffee?"

Since on this occasion he wouldn't be going straight back to his bunk after passing the Cape Aguila light, Captain Webbin decided to brace himself with a mugful. "Milk, but no sugar."

While the chief mate was pouring the coffee, Captain Webbin moved out through the open doorway to the starboard wing of the bridge. The black sky was unbroken by moon or stars. The light on the cape flared up and died out in set timing. His practice of always being on the bridge when rounding Cape Aguila was another favorable circumstance; it obviated the need to invent a pretext for being up at this hour.

Returning to the wheelhouse, the captain felt along the locker top for the mug. His eyes were adjusting to the darkness, and he could now make out shadowy forms—the big chief mate standing with mug in hand, the radar console, the squat helmsman behind the wheel, now on hand to navigate the *Marea* round the cape,

also in his favor, since it would keep the helmsman off the open bridge during the next several minutes.

Mr. Brady said, "I hope we get away from Esmeralda on time. Only a thousand bags to load, didn't you say?"

"That's what the agent told me in Lobos yesterday."

"I had a letter from the wife yesterday. She wrote that her cousin phoned her that the ship's sure to go into the shipyard for annual inspection at the end of this voyage."

There was a note of anticipation in Brady's voice over the prospect of spending a few extra days with his family. Mrs. Brady's cousin was secretary to the marine superintendent, and often passed along information of particular interest to the Bradys.

"I'll write my wife from Esmeralda and tell her not to count on it, though," Mr. Brady added.

In his letter to his wife, Captain Webbin felt sure that Brady would mention his heart attack, and Mrs. Brady, excited over the prospect of quick promotion for her husband, would lose little time in phoning the good news to her cousin, whence it would reach the marine superintendent. Brady wasn't going to be allowed to write that letter.

The chief mate put down his mug and prepared to tidy up. The captain finished his coffee and went over to the radar. He studied the grayish maplike display of the coastline; the image of the cape didn't extend beyond the two-mile range ring, which was to his satisfaction. He then went out to the starboard wing again and stood facing the cool head breeze, waiting for the chief mate to join him.

After stowing away the percolator and the mugs, Brady came out to the captain's side and stared into the darkness ahead. As the light flared up off the bow, Brady remarked, "It must be nearly time for the next course change."

"I'll look again to see how the cape's bearing," Captain Webbin said.

He went back to the wheelhouse, glanced at the radar display, and then crossed to the other doorway. He was able to make out the form of the standby sailor on lookout duty in the port wing; the sailor wasn't likely to leave his post unless called away, and hence was no danger. Here was his only chance to remove the threat to his future. It was now or never.

Captain Webbin returned to the radar. It was still showing a per-

fect outline of the coast, but he muttered loudly enough to be heard by the helmsman, "Breaking down just when we need it most." He went to the doorway and called to the chief mate. "Mr. Brady, the radar's acting up. Looks like commutator trouble again. Go down and take a look at it."

The chief mate hastened aft to the ladder and down to the deck immediately underneath, where the emergency-generator room was located. Captain Webbin then went to the little gate to the docking platform and opened it wide. He next hurried round to the deck-gear locker behind the wheelhouse and groped inside for a chipping hammer. It wouldn't take long for Brady to unscrew the covering plate on the radar motor-generator and find that the commutator wasn't in need of cleaning, a trouble that Brady had cleared up once, earlier in the voyage. Yet that interval was critical. The engine-room telephone might ring, or the smoke-detection unit could sound a false alarm, or any one of other chance happenings that would require a quick response. The captain waited with nerves taut.

Brady was taking longer than expected. Perhaps he had stopped to sandpaper the commutator any-

way. Captain Webbin glanced anxiously at the eastern sky. The light from a first streak of dawn could ruin his plan.

Standing tense beside the top of the ladder, gripping the hammer, Captain Webbin at last heard the generator-room door open and close, a shaft of light shooting momentarily across the deck below; then the clump of the chief mate's

shoes on the steps. His night vision blacked out by the generator-room lights, Brady was virtually a blind man at the moment.

Captain Webbin could feel his heart racing, a tightening sensation across his chest. The mental strain was bringing on his anginal trouble. He couldn't stop now, so close to achieving his purpose. It would be all over in a few min-



utes, and then he could relax, while the ship retraced her course in search of the chief mate, who had mysteriously vanished overboard.

The captain made out the chief mate's big form as it reached the top of the ladder and started toward the wheelhouse door. He moved up silently behind it in his soft slippers and struck with the thick end of the hammer at a point midway between the broad shoulders, a Marine commando trick he'd been taught for disposing of a sentry with no outcry or spilled blood. He caught the chief mate as he slumped and eased him down to the planking, sagging under the weight.

He paused, heart now thumping and breath short. There was no sound from the helmsman within the wheelhouse, nor from the standby sailor on the other side of the bridge; the only other man on deck at this hour was the fore lookout, well out of the way up in the bows.

Laying down the hammer, Captain Webbin stooped and, groping for Brady's armpits, he hooked both hands around them and began dragging the two hundred pounds or so of limp flesh and bone toward the docking platform, which was hardly more than a mat-size wooden grating. Sus-

pended over the ship's side on two chains, it resembled a miniature drawbridge. It had only one safety guard chain mounted on portable waist-high stanchions, with an opening between it and the grating wide enough, Captain Webbin knew, to allow the easy passage of a man's body, even doubled up.

As the captain hauled the chief mate, head and shoulders first, onto the docking platform, his back touched against the guard chain. His next move would have been to step back over the prone form and onto the bridge, and start shoving it by the legs to the outer edge and overboard; but before he could straighten up from his stooping position, his head began spinning. He made a blind, frantic grab for the guard chain and missed. He toppled sideways through the opening beneath it. His next sensation was of plunging downward through endless space.

The Coast Guard investigation into the strange disappearance at sea of Captain Webbin ended in a finding that the captain had apparently fallen overboard to his death. The chief mate, Mr. Brady, testified that after coming up from the emergency-generator room, he was knocked senseless by a terrific blow to his back.

"When I came to, I was lying on the chartroom settee, with the second mate looking down at me. He told me that the helmsman had become anxious when there was no further sign of me or the captain on the bridge, so he called out to the standby man to find out what had happened to us."

"The testimony taken so far," one of the Coast Guard officers said, "makes it appear that only you and the captain were out on the open bridge at the time. It would seem, then, that it must have been the captain who felled you. Do you know of any reason he may have had to attack you with the intention of taking your life?"

Mr. Brady shook his head emphatically. "Absolutely none. I can't figure it out. I always got along well with him on the whole, never the least bit of trouble. It seems to me he must have suddenly gone berserk."

"The chipping hammer found lying on the bridge nearby points to premeditation. However, would you subscribe to the theory that

after dragging you halfway onto the docking platform, apparently with the design of dropping you overboard, Captain Webbin perhaps suffered a heart attack and fell to his death?"

"I find that pretty hard to believe of Captain Webbin. He was in perfect health, even boasted about it. He exercised every morning to keep in good shape."

"Have you ever known him to have a dizzy spell, or lose consciousness on any occasion, or anything else of that nature?"

"Only once, after he'd played golf in a boiling sun the day before we sailed from Lobos. He said it was due to heat exhaustion, but it looked like something worse to me, and I was afraid he might go into convulsions, like a sailor I once treated."

"What did you think it was?"

"Why, sunstroke, of course. What else? His face looked as if he'd dipped it in the bos'n's red-lead pot. He soon got over it though, so I guess he was right about it being only heat exhaustion."



One can never tell about the extent of a brother's loyalty.

I was seated at a corner table finishing my second beer, having ducked into the roadside tavern to take a break from driving and to escape the heat of early afternoon

along the highway, when the young deputy sheriff came through the door, paused to survey the half dozen patrons savoring the soft lights and the coolness, and moved purposefully toward a burly man wearing a denim jacket who was seated at the bar.

"All right, Tom," he said quietly. "You'll have to come along with me."

Brothers

by Stephen
Wasylyk



The deputy was outmatched, a khaki-clad David in a ten-gallon hat against a bearded Goliath with a beer in his hand.

The burly man turned on the stool to face him. "I don't have to do nothing."

"I don't want any trouble," said the deputy. "You come with me and we'll get it all straightened out."

The other man's arm flicked out, his broad palm smashing against the deputy's chest. The deputy flew backward, crashing into table and chairs. He lay dazed for a moment before struggling to his feet, his ten-gallon hat gone and a trickle of blood on his temple. He lifted a tentative hand to his badge as if to reassure himself it was there and he still had the authority it conferred before drawing his gun and pointing it at the burly man. The patrons along the bar scattered.

The revolver wasn't held very steadily and the deputy's eyes showed he wasn't quite sure of what to do next. He moved forward uncertainly.

"You'll have to come along, Tom." His voice broke, the man's name almost a falsetto.

"I told you, I don't have to do nothing." The man spat at the deputy's feet. "You don't have enough guts to shoot me."

He was probably right, I thought, but with someone as scared and confused as the deputy, you could never tell.

The burly man took a step forward. "Shoot," he said contemptuously.

The deputy's eyes shifted from side to side, seeking help from



something invisible beyond the man.

The burly man took another step and reached for the gun quickly, wrapping one big hand

around it and twisting cruelly. For a moment, he and the deputy remained locked together, straining against each other, unequally matched gladiators bathed by the soft lights of the bar and then suddenly the gun went off with a muffled report and the deputy staggered back, a surprised look on his face and his hands clutching his side. He tripped against an overturned chair and went down heavily.

The burly man advanced and stood over him, the deputy's gun in his hand. Without a word, he lifted it slowly, aiming at the prostrate figure.

I stopped breathing, feeling a cold chill finger its way down my spine. There was no way I could stand by and watch him pull the trigger.

I pulled out my own police special, locked it in place with my elbows on the table and my left hand cupping the butt and snapped: "Hold it!"

The burly man turned, annoyed at being interrupted, the gun swinging from the deputy toward me. His eyes picked me up in the shadows along the bar; small mean eyes that questioned my presence and resented my tone.

"Drop it and get your hands up," I said sharply.

"Who the hell are you?" The

deep voice was angry and cold.

"Just drop the gun," I said.

He cursed, dredging up a name that questioned my ancestry. Something flared in his eyes. The gun leveled and went off, the slug smacking the wall behind me.

I squeezed the trigger.

The denim jacket over his chest jumped, he staggered back a couple of steps and then sank to his knees before pitching onto his face. He lay very still, no longer menacing, a mound of faded denim on the barroom floor.

The bartender's white face poked cautiously above the bar. "Call an ambulance," I snapped at him and moved to the deputy's side. He lay propped on one elbow, his face pale, the pain showing in his eyes and I could sense the fear of death hadn't left him yet.

I looked at his wound. It was bad. If he could get to a hospital fast, there was a chance, but I had the suspicion there was no hospital very near and his fear was justified.

The sheriff's office was on the ground floor of a two-story building that also housed the jail; a square room with a battered yellow oak desk and equally battered office furniture piled high with unfiled papers. An air-conditioner

hummed softly in a window and the room was almost chilly.

The sheriff, a spare, crag-faced man in his middle forties, leaned forward on the desk, his hands clasped before him. His name was Scully.

"No question you were justified, Mr. Stanhope," he said. "The witnesses who will talk all agree that Tom Rotak would have shot the deputy again if you hadn't interfered. Tom was a mean one and the boy was raw and inexperienced. He never should have tried to take him alone. He should have called for help."

"Why were you looking for Rotak?"

"The same reason we always looked for him. He would get drunk and beat up on someone. The man he worked over this morning is in the hospital, half dead. The doctors say he may lose the sight of one eye."

"And the deputy?"

He shrugged. "We don't know yet. He lost a lot of blood before we could get him to the hospital. It was lucky for him you decided to stop for that beer. What made you pick that place?"

"No reason," I said. "I was just tired of driving and it looked inviting. Besides, I was thirsty."

He grinned. "It's good to know that a big-city private detective

has the same problems as the rest of us. What are you doing in this neck of the woods anyway?"

I saw no reason to tell everything to Scully, who was just being pleasant and making conversation. I was also being paid to keep quiet.

"On my way back from Nashville," I said carefully. "Went there looking for a bank teller who took off with fifty thousand dollars. Just taking it easy on the way to Philadelphia, staying off the main roads. Closest thing to a vacation I've had in two years."

He nodded. "This is beautiful country to drive through." He rose and came around the desk. "Just wait here for a moment. There's something I want to check."

I moved to the window and stared out at the Appalachian hills pressing in on the small town. Only chance had put me on that road and in that bar and there was no other explanation for it. Even having the gun on me was chance. I had considered packing it away but for some obscure reason had worn it instead. I never anticipated I would have use for it on this trip.

The sheriff came back.

"What now?" I asked. "I know you're not just going to pat me on the back and tell me I did a good

job. What's the legal procedure?"

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable," he said. "You really don't have anything to worry about. We've taken statements from the witnesses and a deposition from the deputy and we have to hold a hearing. Since you're just passing through, I've arranged for that to be held in the morning. You have to be there because I have to hold you on a technical charge for killing a man. But the hearing will be a formality and you should be on your way as soon as it is over. There won't be any trouble. The witnesses agree you not only saved the deputy's life but you had to shoot to save your own because Tom fired first."

He began toying with a pencil on his desk and I had the feeling that there was more he wanted to tell me but didn't know how to say it.

"The thing is," he said hesitantly, "I have to put you in jail overnight."

"I don't see why," I said. "I passed a motel on the way into town."

"No motel," he said. "I don't even want you to go out for dinner."

"I don't understand. You saw my credentials. They're legitimate."

"That has nothing to do with it. The problem is not with you." He put the pencil down and leaned back, hooking his thumbs beneath his belt. "This is a small town. The people are close and, one way or another, many of them are related. Tom Rotak had a lot of relatives and friends who don't take kindly to his being shot. They feel that you had no business interfering, that it was the deputy's problem, that he brought it on himself, that if he couldn't handle a badge he had no call to wear one. Now, they would feel the same way about anyone who did what you did, but feeling is running higher because you're an outsider, a stranger." He came around from behind the desk and said: "Come with me. I want to show you something."

A window in the outer office looked out onto the street. Scully indicated a group of people gathered on the sidewalk across the way.

"Rotak's people," he said. "They've been there ever since the word got around. Tomorrow morning there will be more after the newspaper comes out."

"What are they waiting for?"

"A crack at you. That's why I can't let you go out there. I'm not particularly worried about them, however. Tom had a brother,

Emil, who's just as big and mean as Tom was. He's the one who concerns me. There's some talk that Emil swore he'd get you for killing Tom. Do you have a brother?"

"Yeah," I said. "A few years younger."

"Then you know what I mean."

I felt a touch of sadness and regret. "No," I said shortly. "My brother and I don't get along and that's putting it mildly."

"I'm sorry," he said. "It happens that way sometimes. Unfortunately, there's no law that says one brother has to love another. But that wasn't the way it was with Tom and Emil. They were very close."

I pointed at the crowd. "Which one is Emil?"

"He isn't there. That's what bothers me. I'd rather have him there so I can watch him. He's not the kind who shoots his mouth off. He just might try something and I don't want any trouble. I figure if I put you in a jail cell, I can protect you tonight. You'll be gone in the morning and that will end it."

"Hell," I said, "why not just throw Emil into a cell?"

"I would if I could find him and that's not easy. I had only three deputies. Now one is out of action, another is in the south end

of the county and that leaves the third here with me. I'll stay with you until midnight and then he'll take over."

I nodded. "All right. I have no objections if it will make your job easier. All I want to do is get this over with and be on my way. If spending a night in jail will solve the problem, I'm for it. All I ask is that my suitcase stays with me."

He grinned. "Carrying something valuable?"

"Gold," I said. "Pure gold."

He chuckled. "I'll get it for you if you give me the keys to your trunk. I knew you'd be reasonable."

"I'm always reasonable when it comes to avoiding trouble," I said.

With the coming of night, the crowd across the street dispersed.

Scully gave me a radio, fed me a good meal and left the cell door open. It wasn't the worst jail I had ever been in and better than many motel rooms. He and I played gin rummy until almost midnight.

The shot came when Scully was preparing to leave, talking things over with the deputy, telling him to keep the door locked. From the sharp sound, it had been a rifle, fired from somewhere close and shattering one of the windows.

We all hit the floor before

Scully slapped the light switch off and scrambled on all fours to a window.

"Nothing out there," he said finally.

I picked myself up and dusted myself off. "Your citizens play rough."

"I told you that." Scully flicked the lights on again. "I don't think the shot was meant for anyone. It was just a warning."

I grinned. "I hope so because I am now a true believer."

Scully left and I fell asleep to a country-and-western singer moaning about going to Heaven in the morning. I hoped he wasn't singing about me.

The hearing was held in another wing of the same building before a large crowd that was neither friendly nor hostile. If Emil Rotak was there, no one pointed him out to me. The questioning was short and to the point and the proceedings over by noon. The judge said I was free to go and complimented me on doing my civic duty.

Part of the crowd lingered outside as Scully led me to my car. I donned my sunglasses and shook his hand. "You have any more news on the deputy?"

"He'll be all right," he said. "Although I don't think he'll want

his job back when he recovers. He told me to express his appreciation for what you did for him."

I lifted a hand. "I'll see you again sometime."

He grinned. "You sure will. Right to the county line. I'm escorting you out of my territory just to be sure nothing happens."

"You don't have to do that."

"Sure I do," he said. "I owe you a debt and in this part of the country, a man always pays what he owes."

I followed his black-and-white past the roadside tavern and along the highway. Some miles out of town he pulled off the road. I stopped alongside.

He leaned out of the window. "I'll just stay here for a while to make sure no one follows you. It isn't unheard of for four or five men to pile into a car and go after someone on one of these back roads. They can force you to stop and cause you a lot of grief and no one would be the wiser, so for a time I'll just flag down any car coming along and check it out."

"Suit yourself," I said. "Good-bye and good luck."

About five minutes later, I glanced into the rear-view mirror and saw the car for the first time. It was new, white in color with red racing stripes and an air scoop on the hood. It stayed behind me

for quite a while, neither gaining nor losing ground no matter whether I speeded up or slowed down.

Since it did nothing but hang back there, I forgot about it, concentrating instead on the road, which was two lanes wide and winding through the trees, dipping and climbing as it worked its way along the side of one of the mountains. The road was so smooth, the ride so quiet, I had the feeling I was flying.

I was cruising along, the mountain rising to my left but dropping away sharply on my right; the only protection from the steep drop a row of guard posts, when my smooth ride came to an abrupt end.

I felt a harsh, hard jolt and the car swerved wildly, almost getting away.

In the mirror, I could see the white car slipping back a few feet after ramming me.

"Hell," I said, and jammed down on the accelerator. The car leaped forward, tires screaming as I jockeyed it around curves.

The white car stayed right on my tail, coming close to hitting me on the curves, trying to edge out alongside me. If it could do that, it would be no trick to send me through that guardrail.

My speedometer climbed to

seventy. My car wasn't made for holding this kind of road at this speed. It was too softly sprung, the steering too uncertain. If I kept it up, the white car wouldn't have to push me off. Sooner or later I would hit a curve I couldn't handle.

I watched the car with quick glances in the mirror. An ache started across my shoulders from holding the heavy car on the turns as I barely scraped by the guardrail, the strain sapping my strength and the perspiration flooding down my face.

The white car kept after me like a wolf attacking its wounded prey, slashing at my trunk and rear quarter, trying to slip enough ahead so that it could force my front end into the rail. I realized that the car was literally a bomb, packing plenty of horsepower under the hood and far faster and more maneuverable than my standard hardtop. There was no way to outrun it and I couldn't continue to outdrive the shadow behind the wheel. I had to make a mistake sooner or later.

Emil, I thought; the brother of the man I had killed. I wondered why Scully had let him through.

He had selected a good weapon to kill me. It was far better than a gun or a knife because if he could crowd me off the road at the right

place, and I would bet he knew all of them, I would go down as another traffic fatality and he would be in the clear unless there was a witness, and I was sure he could avoid that on these lightly-traveled back roads.

We flashed around a turn, scaring the life out of a driver going the other way who left us the legacy of a long loud blast of his horn, when I saw a fork in the road coming up. The left continued along the side of the mountain, the right branched downward toward the valley floor. I waited until the last possible second, then twisted the wheel, running through the weeds at the throat of the Y and leaving clouds of dust behind before I managed to swing the car onto the valley road.

The white car, caught by surprise, took the other branch, its brakes already on full, tires screaming.

I had a few seconds leeway. I pushed as hard as I could toward the floor of the valley. Coming out of the last turn, I saw a small two-lane bridge across the creek at the bottom, crossed the bridge and slammed to a stop, skidding my car to block the roadway.

I left the seat, drew my gun and stood behind the car, my elbows resting on the hood, the gun

sighted in on where the white car would appear, hoping I could get a tire. I could hear the roar of the engine coming closer.

Perhaps the driver caught sight of me through the trees. Perhaps some sixth sense warned him.

The car came into view, skidded as the driver brought it to a sudden stop and sat still, purring throatily well out of pistol range.

Impasse, I thought.

The car wouldn't come any closer. It would be a waste of ammunition for me to fire and a waste of time to climb into my car and take out after him. With that engine he would leave me far behind, and the minute I gave up the chase, would be back behind me.

I stood there for a few minutes, feeling the sun hot on my back.

An old pickup passed, skimming by my makeshift roadblock with a glare from the driver, an old man who probably thought I was parked like that to annoy people like him.

I had no choice but to keep going until I ran into some law and see if it could get the white car off my back. One thing was certain. The moment I continued on my way, the white car would be right behind me.

It was, holding a respectable distance now that the road was

flat and forcing me from it would cause little damage.

Ten minutes later, I found myself driving down the main street of another town. I pulled into a gas station.

The kid who manned the pump had a pleasant smile. "Fill it up?" he asked, as if challenging me to refuse.

"Yeah," I said, leaving the car and looking back along the street. The white car was nowhere to be seen.

The idea came, flickered and brightened. "Listen," I said, "do you have some kind of law in this town?"

He pointed. "Right down the street. You'll find Sheriff Olanski's office on the right."

I paid him and cruised slowly until I saw the sheriff's sign, and pulled in alongside a black-and-white cruiser.

The man behind the desk in the office was short and square in his tan uniform, his hair red and curly, a close-cropped brush moustache shaped carefully to follow his upper lip.

He smiled. "Can I help?"

"I hope so," I said. "I need a badge with a little weight behind it."

He kicked a chair toward me. "Let's hear it."

I started with the deputy in the

bar and finished with the white car. "You can check it," I said. "All you have to do is call Sheriff Scully in the next county."

He reached for the phone. "I'll do just that, if you don't mind, even though I read the story in the paper." He held the phone to his ear for what seemed to be a long time. "Funny," he said. "There's no answer. Scully usually has a deputy in the office."

"How about your radio?"

"In these hills? Never have good results." He leaned back and reached for a cigar. "Suppose I buy your story. Just what do you want me to do? Even if what you say is true, I have no charge to hold anyone. It would be your word against Rotak's."

"I know that. All I'd like you to do is hold him in town long enough for me to get a good head start. Give me a half hour and he's not going to know which road I've taken, and even if he did, he couldn't catch me until I'm well out of these hills."

His eyes measured me through a cloud of cigar smoke. "All right," he said finally. "Your credentials are good and your story could be true. We even have some people like the Rotaks around here. I'll check with Scully later, but in the meantime I'll stake out the street and flag down

this white car if it is following you. By the time I get through questioning Emil Rotak, you'll have your half hour."

I held out my hand. "Fair enough. If this thing goes on, one of us is going to get killed, and I don't intend it to be me—especially when there's no reason for it."

We stepped out of the office. Just visible in the gas station up the road was the white car. I pointed it out to Olanski.

"You won't have to watch for it," I said. "There it is."

He nodded. "Okay. I'll hold him here long enough for you to get started. I still don't know if this is some kind of game you're playing, but I can't see that doing what you ask will do any harm."

I headed out of town. Once out on the road, I pushed my car to the limit, wanting to put as much distance between the white car and myself as possible, relaxing and slowing only after a half hour of hard driving. My rear-view mirror showed nothing.

I was trying to get something other than country-and-western music on the radio when I glanced up into the mirror.

The white car was back, bearing down as if it intended to run right through me.

I cursed Olanski and jammed

my foot down. The car couldn't have caught me in a worse place. I was on the side of one of the innumerable Appalachian hills again, riding above another steep slope.

I wondered what had gone wrong back in town. Olanski couldn't have delayed the car long or it wouldn't be here now.

That no longer mattered. What did matter was that I sensed an impatience in the way the car was being handled, as if the driver were determined to finish what he had started before very much more time passed.

I was tired of the cat-and-mouse game. Until now, I had done my best to avoid trouble, to bring some measure of common sense into the situation, content to stay alive. I hadn't looked for more than that, or wanted more than that, but the shadow behind the wheel of the white car didn't want it that way and wouldn't accept anything less than sending me off the road.

So be it, I thought.

I eased up enough to let the white car come closer, braced myself for the inevitable bump from behind, anticipated it and corrected for it and began weaving from side to side to keep him from passing. The car attacked with a kind of suppressed fury,

darting from left to right behind me, looking for an opening, letting up only when we passed another car.

We had come out of a long curve into a straight stretch when I twisted the wheel left, then right, giving the white car the opening it had been looking for. It shot through, pulled even with me, edged a little ahead and started drifting into me as my speedometer hovered around sixty-five.

I let it get close, too close, as the guardrail flashed by and I was riding half on the road and half on the shoulder. I stood on the brake for a split second, letting the white car shoot ahead. Then I jammed the wheel over hard.

I caught him in the right rear quarter, spun him with screeching tires end for end until he crashed through the guardrail and I almost followed, and then in the mirror as I slowed I could see the car rolling and bumping down the rocky slope.

I pulled to the side of the road and sat for a few minutes, feeling no sense of triumph, only relieved that it was all over. I let the tension drain before leaving my car and walking back to where the guardrail had been leveled.

The car had left long furrows of

torn earth as it had plummeted down the slope and it now lay on its side some two hundred yards down the hillside, brought to a halt by some strong young pines. One front wheel still turned lazily.

All I had to do was climb into my battered car and leave, but as with the incident involving the deputy, I couldn't walk away.

I went over the lip of the hill, sliding and slipping through the weeds down toward the wreck. The odor of spilled gasoline and hot oil was strong and pungent. I worked my way around to the front and peered through the starred windshield.

All I had ever seen of the driver was a dim shape through dusty windows made more opaque by a glaring sun, my eyes too occupied with the road, my mind too busy calculating speed and distance. Besides, I felt I had no reason to look. There could be only one man driving that car, one man with a reason to kill me: Emil Rotak.

The man crumpled inside the car had been big, as big as I was and even bigger than Tom Rotak. I didn't have to do anything but look at him to know he was dead. No one could leave the road like that and survive.

The shadow behind the wheel was, no longer formless and face-

less. He was a man and I had killed him. I felt a little confused and a little sick.

What a waste, I thought. Brothers; there was no telling about brothers.

A siren sounded in the distance, wailing high and low, its sound bouncing off the hills and preceding the black-and-white that skidded to a halt at the break in the guardrail. Olanski came around the car, his red hair gleaming in the late afternoon sun, and yelled something. I lifted one arm and let it drop with a grim finality.

The ambulance and the tow truck had come and the men had rigged a rope and were preparing to haul the body up the slope. Olanski and I stood on the roadway, watching them remove the trapped body from the car below.

"I don't understand it," he said. "I don't understand any of it. The man isn't Emil Rotak. He must be a friend of the family. Or maybe an imported relative. When they bring him up, I'll check his I.D."

"What difference does it make who he is?" My voice was bitter. "I told you to hold him. If you had kept him from following, this wouldn't have happened."

"Okay," said Olanski. "So I'm dumb. I'm stupid. But you told

me a man named Emil Rotak was driving that car. I know Emil. I never saw the man in the car in my life. When I saw it wasn't Rotak, I thought you were pulling some kind of con game, that maybe you were some kind of nut. He denied everything, said he was just driving through, so I let him go."

"You could have asked for identification."

"His I.D. would have meant nothing to me then."

"Maybe," I said. "But you followed him anyway. Too late, but you followed. Why?"

"Because I got a call from Scully's deputy. Scully tried to pull the man over for a routine check at the county line, but the man ran him down. That's why there was no answer at the office and no one to pursue. The deputy had to rush Scully to the hospital. He called me as soon as he could to warn me to keep an eye out for the car."

"How is Scully?"

"Battered but all right. He'll be happy to know you're alive. I guess he'll want to pick up Emil Rotak for questioning. You killed Rotak's brother and he tried to get you, although proving it will be something else. Maybe that's how Rotak wanted it."

The sun had set and twilight

filled the valley as if a curtain were descending.

I might as well tell him, I thought.

"Rotak had nothing to do with it," I said slowly. "I didn't know until I saw the body in the wreck, but the man was the one I followed to Nashville. He was a bank teller who made off with fifty thousand dollars. Because I knew him, the bank hired me to get the money back. They didn't want the man, just the money. They preferred to keep the whole thing quiet. The publicity would be bad for them. They wanted me to persuade him to give up the money, and if that didn't work to take it from him. I had to take it. He swore he would never let me get away with that. I didn't believe him but decided to take these back roads anyway, just to avoid trouble. He must have seen the story about the deputy in the newspapers and picked up my trail, but I never thought he'd try to kill me."

We watched the body being hauled up the steep slope, the

basket making very slow progress.

"Didn't you recognize his car?"

"It wasn't the one I tracked from Philadelphia. He must have traded for it or rented it."

"Where is the money now?" asked Olanski. "I'll have to see it and talk to the people at that bank before I can let you go. This story is just as wild as the first one you told me, you understand."

"You do just that," I said. "The money is in the suitcase in my trunk. I wish I'd never seen it now. He knew I had it with me. I guess he thought he'd run me off the road, then come back for it."

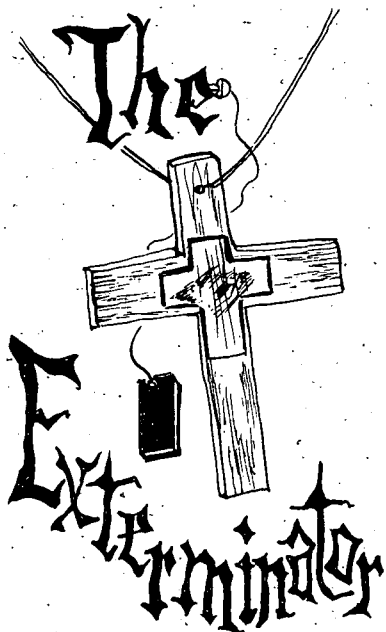
"Yeah. He really must have hated you for taking it away from him." Olanski pulled out his notebook. "Now that we know what this was all about, we may as well start writing it up. Who was he?"

It was almost dark now, as though the fast descending night was drawing the final curtain on something that had started a long time ago.

I took a deep breath and tried to hold my voice steady. "He was my brother," I said quietly.



It is reasonable to assume that a grave situation can arise when amateurs trifle with an exterminator.



The alarm buzzer sounded. The red warning light above the workbench flashed.

Something was prowling around outside the house.

Quickly, Columbine turned down the thermostat of the small furnace, then dropped his one remaining silver bullet into the cylinder of his revolver. As he left

the workshop he took down from its peg the six-inch wooden cross and hung it about his neck. At the center of the cross, where a crucified figure might be nailed, was a two-inch convex mirror, which reflected all that fell upon it like a wild, distorting eye.

Thus armed, Columbine moved through the house to the heavily bolted front door. He put his eye to the peephole, at the same time flipping on the outside floodlights.

Three figures fell back from the door and shaded their eyes against the noonlike glare. Columbine studied their rather plain, ill-fitting suits and shiny new shoes. Their pinkish necks seemed more used to work shirts than stiff collars and clumsily knotted ties.

He smiled. Nothing to fear from them. They were probably customers.

To be safe he addressed the strangers through the intercom: "Identify yourselves and state your business."

The tallest of the three looked about for the voice, then spotted the speaker by the door and said

in a rustic twang, "We want to see Mr. Columbine. We got a problem."

"A real big problem," said one of his companions.

"And we've come a long way, too. More'n a hundred miles," the third added.

Columbine tucked the .32 in his waistband where he could get it quickly, if the need arose, and unbolted the door, saying, "I am Columbine. Please come in."

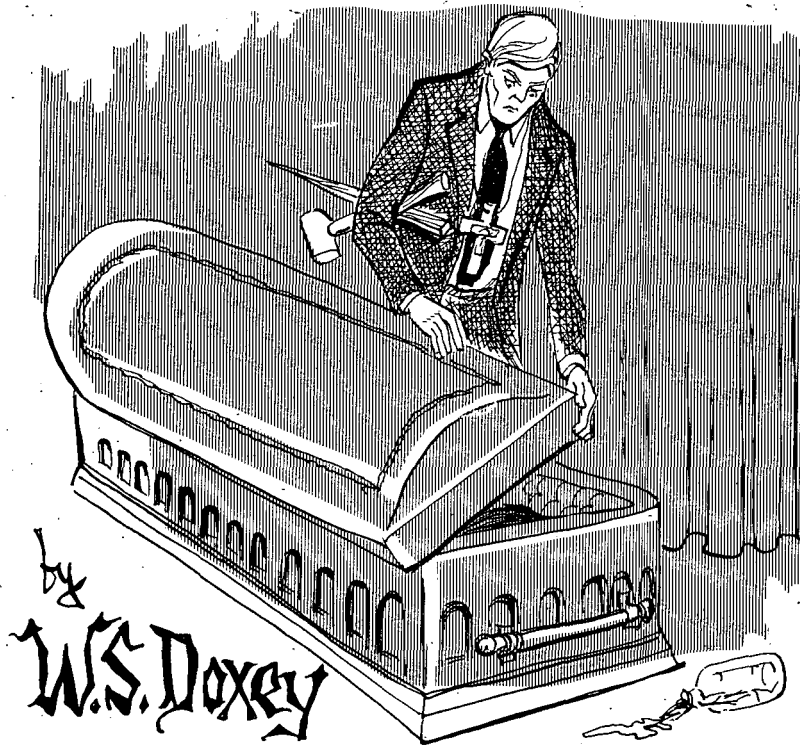
The three wiped their shoes

briskly on the hemp mat and entered. Columbine steered them into his livingroom and after they were seated asked what they wanted.

"Well," said the spokesman, "like I said, we got a problem." He glanced around nervously. "Can I talk plain?"

"Certainly," Columbine replied. "Is it a werewolf or a vampire?"

The three visitors looked at one another with surprised, embarrassed expressions.



"No need to waste words," Columbine continued. "You wouldn't be here unless it were one of the two—or perhaps a case of possession or sorcery. So which is it? Speak up, my time is valuable."

"Well, since you put it that way," said the spokesman, "we think it's a vampire."

"Think?"

"What Clyde means," said the man sitting next to him on the sofa, "is we've had five people die mysterious like. They was drained of blood. Holes in the throat. And the police don't know what to do, do they, Fred?"

"That's right," the third man said. "I'm the chief and I ought to know. Beats all I've ever seen. Not that I believe in vampires, mind you."

"So that's the problem," said Clyde. "Can you help us?"

Columbine stood and faced them. "Of course I can, if you're willing to meet my terms."

"How much you charge for a vampire?"

"I have a standard fee, based upon population. I get a dollar per person in the community."

"Well, that seems fair. And our town's pretty small."

"Yeah, not more than five hundred," said Clyde.

Columbine took down a book

from the shelf near the door.

"What's the name of your town?"

"Bowdon. What book's that?"

"The latest official census. B-o-w-d-o-n. Let's see."

His finger found the town. He glanced down at the three men who now seemed somewhat uncomfortable. "Bowdon's grown very fast," he said. "From five hundred to 3708."

"That so?" said Clyde. "Why, appears a lot smaller to me."

Columbine replaced the book on the shelf. "My fee's \$3708.00, plus expenses. Agreed?"

"Almost," replied Fred. "I mean, you ought to knock off the five that were killed, plus the one that's the vampire."

"Yes, sir, fair's fair!" said Clyde.

"All right, then; make it \$3702.00. No need to shake hands or sign a contract. In my profession a man's word is all he needs."

The three men from Bowdon nodded and smiled appreciatively at each other.

The trap was set.

Columbine relaxed on the lumpy bed at the Dixie Motel and scanned the neat little article he had planted on page one of the *Bowdon Free Press*.

"Local clinic proudly announces adequate whole-blood supply," it declared. "Authorities revealed to-

day that our clinic is now storing ten pints of whole blood to be used in the event of emergencies. Said blood is kept in a special cooler located in the lab and may be used by any Bowdon resident."

There was a photo of a man in a white jacket shaking hands with a man in a dark suit, the local doctor and the mayor.

Columbine tossed the paper onto a chair and turned on the TV. The blood had cost a lot, but they would reimburse him. When he told Clyde and Fred what he wanted done, they were hesitant at first, so he gave them a simple explanation, not bothering to go into the scientific details. They didn't understand, but at least they were satisfied.

Columbine glanced around the room: window was secure, ditto for the door; .32 was under the pillow, cross around neck, and beneath the bed was his traveling case, containing a very choice pine stake, a wooden mallet, and a small black box—not that he himself expected any trouble.

The vampire would make a beeline for the clinic. Columbine settled back on the bed. He would sleep late; then, after a nice breakfast, or brunch, go to work.

He yawned and tried to watch Johnny Carson slip and slide through another monologue, but it

was no use. He was soon asleep.

The tinny clang of the phone woke him. He checked his watch—barely eight. Was the sun up? Light crept in round the edges of the shut blind.

"Columbine here. Go ahead."

It was Clyde. He screamed, "It happened! It happened!"

"Okay, take it easy. Explain."

"The vampire—it busted the back door of the clinic right off the hinges! Ripped open the ice-box! Took every last pint of blood!"

"Good."

"But that's not all! It got Fred, too!"

"Fred?"

"Yeah. He was staked out in the lab. Figured he'd catch the vampire himself. He's dead with two little holes in his throat!"

Amateurs! thought Columbine. *Would they never learn?*

To Clyde he said, "You know what must be done with Fred's remains. Be certain that no one hears of this for the present, understand? I'll call you soon as I complete my job."

Columbine hung up the phone and turned over and went back to sleep for several hours. When he next awoke it was noon.

After a hearty meal at the cafe across the street from the motel,

Columbine went to work. From the traveling case he took the small black box and slipped it into his jacket pocket. Next he plugged an earphone device into the box and into his ear, running the wire inside his jacket, so that if anyone noticed they'd think only that he was hard of hearing.

Case in hand, Columbine left the motel and began his walk through the streets of Bowdon. This was the aspect of the job that he liked most. It was good to get out in the fresh air and sunlight, to take the pulse of a community, as it were.

As he strolled along he whistled a merry tune and smiled at everyone he met. They were friendly in return, but in a slightly hesitant manner, which indicated their awareness of him as a stranger. Some, no doubt, figured he might be the vampire.

Columbine grinned. They'd be wrong for two reasons. First, he wasn't; and second, a vampire could not face the sun. No, right now, the vampire was sleeping peacefully in the dark security of his coffin, his fierce thirst for human blood temporarily satisfied by the pints he'd taken from the clinic and from hapless Fred.

"Sweet dreams, monster," Columbine whispered, "while they last. A nightmare is on the way."

It was only a matter of time. Sooner or later Columbine's feet would bring him close enough to the stolen blood for the sensing device in the black box to pick up the steady emission of particles from the radioactive isotope he had added. Once contact was made, he had only to home in on the rapidly increasing clicks sounded by the counter.

Even now, as he passed through a small park, he detected a response over and above that caused by normal background radiation. He crossed the street. The clicking increased. Beyond rose a church. Irony of ironies—could it be . . . ?

He went straight for the church building and started up the steps. The clicking subsided. He retreated. It picked up. To his right was a small frame house set back from the street in a yard surrounded by a picket fence.

Columbine moved toward the gate. The clicking became almost a solid buzz.

He passed through the gate and went up the walk to the porch. Now the buzzing was so intense he had to reach inside his pocket and cut down the volume.

He pressed the doorbell, then checked the mailbox. There was no name, no number. Dark curtains covered the front windows.

Columbine rapped his knuckles on the door, then pressed his ear against it and listened.

Nothing.

He tried the door.

Locked.

No problem. Between the door and jamb he inserted a strip of plastic and gave a skillful push. The bolt slid back enough that he could open the door.

It was dark and musty inside. The rooms were bare. He threw back the curtains. Streamers of dust floated in the sunlight. Footprints led across the floor to a hallway.

Columbine stopped and took the wooden stake and mallet from his traveling case. Leaving the case behind, he followed the prints down the hall to a door at the rear of the house.

The sensing device buzzed like a horde of angry mosquitoes. He unplugged it, and with the cross hanging round his neck in plain view, just in case, opened the door.

It took a moment for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, but there in the middle of the floor was what he expected to find—a closed casket. Several shattered blood bottles were nearby.

He raised the lid and peeked in.

The young woman seemed to be peacefully asleep. Her raven

hair was neatly combed back from her pale forehead. The lashes of her eyes were dark and long. The simple black gown she wore revealed a comely body.

Columbine did not hesitate.

One stroke of the mallet was enough to drive the wooden stake through the vampire's heart.

Her eyes flew open. She shrieked. Her powerful hands clutched the stake, tried to wrench it out—but it was too late.

A pale fluid spilled from the wound in her breast. She fixed her hate-filled gaze upon Columbine, upon the cross, and expired. Her flesh withered, shrunk, until all that remained within the casket was a deflated, lumpy outline of a once-human form, the eyes shut, the mouth set in a toothy grimace.

"Amy Winters! Who'd ever have thought?" exclaimed Clyde. "Why, last we heard of her she was gone off somewhere in Europe to study the organ. Caused a fund at the bank to make sure her property was kept up. Beats all, don't it?"

Columbine nodded. "And it also ends my business here. You have the money?"

Clyde frowned and took Columbine by the arm to guide him from the workroom of the funeral

home into the office of Lester Sutton, the owner.

"Lester, this fellow wants his money," said Clyde.

Sutton glanced up from the papers on his desk. "He does? Well, what d'you know?"

"The figure we agreed upon is \$3702.00." Columbine withdrew a paper from his pocket. "I've itemized my expenses. They come to \$410.00. You owe me altogether \$4112.00. I prefer cash. Large bills will be fine."

Clyde giggled. "He said large bills, Lester!"

"I heard." He pointed a manicured finger at Columbine. "You're overcharging, mister! Don't think just 'cause you're a city boy you can put one over on us!"

"That's right," said Clyde. "We ain't about to pay you for Fred. He died, remember?"

"All right," said Columbine, "subtract a dollar."

"We got expenses, too," said Clyde. "Somebody's got to pay Lester here for cremating the dead. Just don't see how we can meet every obligation."

Columbine recognized the tone in Clyde's voice, the cunning look on the undertaker's face. He smiled inwardly. Amateurs! People had refused to pay him before.

"So," said Clyde, "it looks like

we can't pay you, Mr. Columbine. It's not that we don't appreciate what you done. It's just, well, we're real sorry but that's the way it is."

"Suppose I sue?"

"You go ahead and try!" said Lester. "How far you think you'll get? Ain't no lawyer, much less judge, who'll listen to your yarn about vampires. In fact, you start talking in public like that and they'll probably have you committed to the state mental hospital!"

"Yeah, and if that don't shut you up, tell him what else we got, Lester."

"I aim to, Clyde. We got ourselves a dead woman with a stake through her heart and we also got the wooden mallet what done the driving, and what's more the handle of that mallet's got a fine set of fingerprints belonging to a fellow name of Columbine. Way I see it, looks like an open-and-shut case of murder in the first degree."

Columbine frowned and studied the amused expressions on the country boys' faces. Then he said, "Well, I guess I know when I'm beat. You two are real smart."

"Smart enough," grinned Clyde.

"That's right," said Columbine. "And the last thing I want is trouble. Would you mind burning

the mallet with the vampire's body?"

"We might do that," said Lester, "if you leave Bowdon and never come back."

"Oh, I intend to. But I've got to be careful. When were you planning to cremate the remains?"

"I do all my burning after midnight, so the folks won't be alarmed by the smoke. Makes some nervous."

"You think of everything," said Columbine. "Well, I'd best be leaving. No hard feelings?"

Clyde and Lester clapped their hands and hee-hawed.

Columbine went to the cafe where he had eaten brunch and had an early supper. Then he returned to his motel room and killed time watching TV.

At eleven-thirty he checked out.

At eleven-thirty-six he parked his car behind Lester Sutton's funeral home and let himself in with his plastic strip.

Amy Winters' casket had been moved to within several feet of the ancient iron furnace Sutton

used for cremation. Columbine released the latch and opened the lid. The odor of death made him gasp, but he could not turn back from what had to be done.

He took the splintery wooden stake in both hands and pulled it free of the corpse.

There was a sound, a very faint sigh, and as he looked down into the casket he saw the loose black gown begin moving, ever so slightly, but moving, filling, as though someone were pushing life back into the skin and bones beneath it.

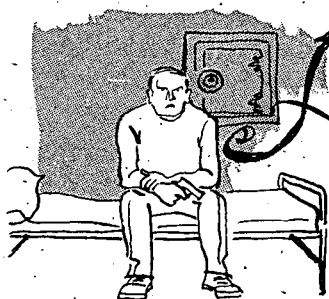
Columbine tossed the stake and mallet into the furnace. It would be very interesting to wait and watch Amy Winters come back, but it would also be dangerous. She would be famished.

Columbine shut the lid and then broke the latch so it could be opened from the inside with no trouble at all.

The last laugh was his. He took it when his car clock read 12:30 and the peaceful little town of Bowdon was twenty miles behind him.



One may need all the knowledgeable help he can muster to solve the Final-Problem.



Aunt Abigail's Wall Safe

by
William Brittain

So there, essentially, is the problem. Aunt Abigail is in and out of the house all the time, but Rogers is never more than a few feet from the wall safe. He even sleeps on a cot in the same room, and he's a very light sleeper. So how are you going to provide yourself with the time to open it? Think, confound it! Think!"

From his place behind the lectern on the raised dais, Colin Kittridge surveyed the classroom. One index finger was poised expectantly, ready to point in the direction of the first student to volunteer.

"Oh, come, come, ladies and gentlemen. This is a class in the Mystery Story. All semester long I've been giving you these little

criminological problems, and several of you have arrived at extremely imaginative solutions. But now, with the final examination coming up next week, you find yourselves stumped by Aunt Abigail, with a safe filled with jewelry and negotiable securities. Can we not find some way to relieve her of them?"

A tentative hand poked upward from the rear of the room.

"Mr. Peabody!" Colin said with a grin. "I've maintained all year that one day you'd make a fair

detective story writer once you'd learned the basics of English grammar. What do you have for us?"

Peabody rose, looking about uncertainly. Clutched in his hands was a single mimeographed page. At the top of the paper the words **PROBLEM TEN—AUNT ABIGAIL'S WALL SAFE** appeared in capital letters. Below the title were three single-spaced, type-written paragraphs.

"First I'd like to be sure I understand the problem, sir," mumbled Peabody.

"A little late for that, isn't it?" Colin asked. "You should have thought of that when I gave you the assignment."

"Yes, sir. But is Rogers the only servant Aunt Abigail has?"

"I think we can assume that, yes."

"But wouldn't a rich old broad—I mean, woman—like that have maids and cooks and things?"

"What you have in your hands, Mr. Peabody, is a fictional problem on how to commit a crime. It isn't a treatise on the habits of the wealthy. Aside from Aunt Abigail, Rogers is the only one in the house. Take my word for it. He is, however, armed to the teeth and a master at hand-to-hand combat. All you have is the ability to

crack the safe, given an hour's time. Understood?"

"Yes, Professor Kittridge. Only, according to this, we've got to get Rogers out of the way somehow without his even suspecting, when he returns, that the safe has been opened."

"Exactly!" Colin punctuated his remark with a poking finger. "No bringing in an army of strong-arm goons to waylay him while you attack the combination. You've got to have time to make your escape. If Rogers remains in ignorance of the fact that Aunt Abigail was robbed, you'll have at least six weeks to make your way to Argentina before you're even suspected."

"Why couldn't old Kittridge just use a textbook instead of giving us these crazy problems?" mumbled someone over near the windows.

Kittridge heard the remark. "Because my 'crazy problems,' Mr. Bonmeister, force you to think. You don't like that, do you? But thought is the essence of the mystery story. Not for the purist, the breaking of bones and the rending of flesh to be found on TV and in the movies. No, the problem is the thing."

Colin swiveled about. "Back to you, Mr. Peabody. How are you going to get at that safe? Provide

a viable answer, and fame and fortune are yours. Or, on a more practical level, you will at last graduate from this university. Now then, what say you?"

"Well, uh . . ." Peabody glanced nervously at his own writing on the back of the paper. "I figured that with seeing nobody but Aunt Abigail all the time, Rogers would be ready for a little . . . uh . . . companionship, if you get what I mean. So I figured if I could get some good-looking girl to stand outside the window while Aunt Abigail was away and start taking off her clothes, well . . ." His face began to redden from the collar up. "I could just let nature take its course."

"Interesting from a physiological standpoint," Colin said, "but hardly satisfactory, Peabody. I tend to believe that Rogers would be more likely to suspect a plot against the valuables which would put him more firmly on his guard. No, I think for the time being we must consider Rogers a temporary eunuch."

There was a titter of laughter around the classroom.

"I'd like to hear from someone else," Colin said.

"Wouldn't he have to go to the bathroom sometime?" called an anonymous voice.

"Better," replied Colin. "But for

a whole hour?" His eyebrows shot up halfway to his hairline.

A second round of laughter followed.

"Miss Dell, what about you?" Colin went on, pleased that his little joke had gone over so well.

"I suggest hypnotism . . ." the plump girl began hesitantly.

Colin's flat palm thumped on the lectern. Miss Dell's impracticalities ranged from ESP to exorcism.

"Hypnotism is a very inexact science," Colin explained for the fourth time that semester. "Unlike what you see on television, the subject will perform no acts he would be unwilling to do when awake. Furthermore, there is the problem of bringing about the trance. No, Miss Dell, I'm afraid not."

He drummed impatiently on the lectern with his fingers. "Who else?"

No answer; on the wall, the clock chugged ahead another minute.

"I must say I expected better of you," Colin's voice dripped scorn. "Why, in **PROBLEM FOUR—THE PERFORMER MUST DIE** the results were astonishingly good. You developed no less than ten foolproof methods of killing an actor while he was on stage. And that was only a few weeks

into the course. And PROBLEM SEVEN—DEALER'S CHOICE showed a remarkable grasp of the intricacies of seven-card stud poker and a superabundance of cheating methods. Yet here we are with finals almost upon us, and it seems that poor old Aunt Abigail and her servant Rogers have you all stumped. Disappointing—most disappointing.”

He was so carried away by his own monologue that he almost failed to notice the hand raised directly in front of him.

“Miss Oakes!” he said, his pointing finger zeroing in on the pert face below the raised hand. “Charming, beautiful and—let us hope—criminally inclined, at least for the moment. Would you care to give us your idea? Keep in mind that sexual attraction has already been ruled out.”

“Uh-huh.” Lauren Oakes rose from her seat, regarding her paper through limpid blue eyes.

“Then go on, please. All eyes—at least those of the male members of the class—are on you.”

“Well, I was thinking of drug-ging Rogers, Professor Kittridge, with some sleeping drug. It shouldn't be too hard to get a prescription from some doctor, even if the capsules weren't already available in the family medicine cabinet. And no matter how

big Rogers was, four or five of the capsules—”

“Oh, please, Miss Oakes. I have no doubt that you could get Rogers to take the drug on some pretext or other. You could charm Samson into getting a Yul Brynner haircut. But when he awoke he'd have such a hangover from the drug he'd be sure to suspect—”

“But you don't understand,” Lauren persevered. “First, I'd get Rogers to have a few drinks with me. I'd use champagne—pretend it was a celebration of some kind. Then I'd switch to something more potent.”

In the rear of the room Peabody began talking even before his hand was fully raised. “But Rogers wouldn't be fool enough to—”

“Wait a minute.” Colin waved the boy to silence. “Go on, Miss Oakes.”

“That's the whole point. I wouldn't need to give Rogers enough to get him really drunk. I'd put the pills in one of the drinks, and Rogers would pass out. When he came to, he'd believe it was the drinks that had given him the hangover, not the drug. He'd blame himself for his own stupidity and never even worry about the safe being robbed.”

“But how do you know how much liquor Rogers can hold?”

Peabody persisted. "The problem doesn't say anything about that."

"Make up your own conditions then," said Colin. "Make him a one-drink man. Miss Oakes, I believe you've hit upon it. And I'd be very grateful for a look at how you've written it out. May I have the paper, please?"

As Colin took it from her there was a grumbling throughout the room. "It's just not fair," muttered Bonmeister. "The sexy ones pass, and we fail."

"Not so," was Colin's reply. "Lauren just happens to have the only practical solution to Problem Ten."

"I wish she'd try it out," Bonmeister went on, "just so I could see Rogers slap her around after he didn't fall for her little trick."

"Unfortunately the theories we expound so freely in this room have little application outside of the field of detective fiction," Colin said. "And don't forget, our final exam will be during the class period on Monday. Study hard, and have a good weekend."

Colin himself intended to have a splendid weekend. He went to his rooms and packed a single suitcase. Into a pocket of his tweed jacket went the contents of a plastic bottle from the medicine cabinet.

He carried the bag out to the curb and placed it in the rear of the little Italian sports car, which was the single luxury he was able to afford on his meager professor's salary. Then he roared off, stopping briefly at a liquor store where he purchased two bottles: one a mild domestic champagne, and the other something called Old Capricorn—110 proof.

From the city he traveled northward into the mountains. He passed through the resort area, and after a drive of some four hours he came to a tiny village in the foothills called Westhall. The village consisted almost entirely of small frame houses. The "almost" was a huge, rambling, fieldstone mansion set up on a hill overlooking acres of farmland.

He pulled into the driveway and cut the motor. The sun was just setting, and before rapping at the oak door he paused to admire the vivid reds and yellows etched across the sky. The drive, he found, had invigorated, rather than tired him. The trees with their new leaves had held his rapt attention on those stretches of road where the driving became boring.

Perhaps that's why he never noticed the black Volkswagen that had followed him all the way from the city.

He tugged at the metal knocker and then let it fall, hearing the booming sound echo inside the house. There was the plodding sound of footsteps from within, and then the door opened.

The man who stood in the doorway was well over six feet tall, and underneath his shirt the muscles lay in slabs. Thick calluses covered the edges and heels of both hands, the result of hundreds of hours of pounding them against a burlap bag filled with rice. Either of those hands, Colin knew, could break an oak board or a neck with equal ease. A .45 pistol was tucked into the man's waistband; and another weapon pulled at his hip pocket.

"Good evening, Albert," Colin said easily. "Is Auntie Cecelia in?"

"No." The face remained expressionless.

"When will she be back?"

"She's inna city, shopping. Won't be back until tomorra. Thought she wrote you."

Colin shook his head. "If so, the letter probably got lost in the mail somewhere. May I come in?"

"She's your aunt. 'Scuse me. I gotta get back an' stand guard."

"Of course. Mind if I join you?"

"Nope." Albert led the way through the livingroom and into a small study. An empty desk stood in one corner. The only other fur-

niture was a metal cot against the far wall.

Above the cot the round metal door of a safe was let into the wall.

"I'll only be a moment, Albert," said Colin, turning about. "There are some things I'd like to get from the car."

"Sure. I'd help you, only I ain't supposed to leave here. Besides, I gotta call the police. Let 'em know who's with me. There ain't supposed to be strangers around."

"I'm no stranger, Albert."

"To the police, you are. I'm the only one here, far as they know."

"All right, you make the call while I bring in my bag." It would be sticky, Colin thought, if the safe were found broken into while he was here. Of course if nobody *knew* the safe had been opened . . .

Five minutes later he returned to the study. He held the two bottles in one hand, and a pair of glasses in the other. "Come on, Albert," he said. "Help me celebrate."

"Celebrate? Celebrate what?"

"Why . . . uh . . . the end of the college term. No more pencils, no more books . . ."

". . . No more teachers' dirty looks." Albert grinned hugely. "I remember that one."

With a loud pop, Colin twisted

the cork from the bottle of champagne. He poured a bit into each glass.

"We should have stemware," he said. "But these will have to do." He extended a glass toward Albert. "Down the hatch."

"I ain't used to that stuff. Besides, it's against the rules to drink onna job."

"Just a simple toast, Albert. See?" Colin threw back his head and drained his glass with a single swallow. "It's as harmless as soda pop."

"Yeah? Lemme try."

Three glasses later, Colin found his own head beginning to spin. He sternly reminded himself to sip and let Albert do the guzzling. Time, he decided, to switch to Old Capricorn.

Albert soon made fine headway into the second bottle. Then Colin filled Albert's glass almost to the brim. On the pretext of getting some water for his own drink he took both glasses into the kitchen and added the powder from five of the sleeping capsules to the full glass.

Albert polished it off in three magnificent swallows.

Colin watched the giant across the room closely. No effect at first. Then Albert began twitching his head as if annoyed at an insect buzzing about him. He looked

straight ahead, trying to bring his eyes into focus. Two short steps brought him to the end of the cot. His body sagged forward, and the floorboards creaked alarmingly as he crashed down onto the mattress like a giant oak felled by a woodsman.

Colin felt for the pulse. It was there, slow but steady. Nothing to worry about except a king-size hangover in the morning. By that time Colin would be gone, and Albert would be afraid to tell Aunt Cecelia anything about his visit.

He leaned across the cot, gently caressing the dial of the safe with his fingers. He glanced at his watch: seven-thirty. Lots of time.

He found the last number of the combination, twisted the handle and opened the safe at exactly eight-fifteen. He felt he could have done it faster if Albert's snoring hadn't made it hard to hear the tumblers.

The jewelry was in three mahogany cases: sparkling diamonds and glittering rubies and emeralds, mounted in chaste silver and gold. He stuffed the necklaces, bracelets, rings and brooches into his jacket pockets, lovingly closing and replacing the cases. Then he took out three thick wads of papers wrapped in—what else?—red tape: bearer bonds, payable to

whoever happened to possess them.

Colin's twelve-month sabbatical from his college teaching had already been approved. Once he'd finished with final examinations next week, he wouldn't even be missed for a year—unless Aunt Cecilia decided to open the safe, which wasn't likely.

Albert was too stupid to believe Colin could break into the safe and too wise to tell Auntie that he'd been asleep on the job. He liked his position and would do anything to protect it.

"Hello, Professor Kittridge."

The soft, feminine voice came from the doorway behind him. It was familiar somehow. He turned about, his jaw dropping open in surprise.

"Miss Oakes—Lauren! What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come up and see how you were making out. Pretty well, it seems." She nodded toward the bonds, still clutched in his hands.

"Why, I . . . uh . . . you don't understand. These belong to my aunt."

"Yes," the girl said, "I'm sure they do. But that doesn't explain what you're doing with them."

"I . . . I don't believe you're owed any explanation." Colin tried desperately to retrieve the situation. "I'm not used to having

members of my class spy on me. Particularly here, so far from the university."

"And I'm not accustomed to being used to plan your crimes for you, Colin," replied Lauren in a kittenish purr.

"Crimes?" Colin took a deep breath and waited for his heart-beat to slow down. "I don't understand."

"Oh really, Colin." She nodded toward the sleeping Albert. "I don't know his real name, but that's Rogers, isn't it?"

"What?"

"Rogers. From the problem you gave us in class today. Is he as full of liquor and drugs as my paper called for?"

"Don't be silly, Lauren, I—"

"And this wasn't the only caper you let us plan, was it?" she went on. "You gave us **PROBLEM THREE—HOW MUCH IS THAT DIAMOND IN THE WINDOW?** and two weeks later a snatch-and-grab artist relieved Blodgett's Jewelry Store of the finest gems it had on display. Who could that have been, Colin? Or **PROBLEM SIX—STEAL THROUGH THE STEEL** just days before the armored car robbery on Route 8. The use of a hornet's nest in the ventilating system on that one was exactly what Joe Peabody suggested in class. But **PROBLEM**

EIGHT—MAFIA MASQUERADE
was probably your best . . .”

“I suppose you can prove all this?”

“I can prove what you were doing this evening.” Lauren patted a little black case which hung from her shoulder. “A camera,” she said. “High-speed film, no flash needed. I was standing outside the window all the while you were working on the safe. You see, I followed you up here, Colin. In class today I was certain you were setting up another caper, planned by the Mystery Story class, and I wanted to be in on it. So I kept an eye on you.”

“What now? The police?”

“Don’t be silly, darling.”

“What, then?”

“Colin, my parents sent me to college with one purpose only—to attract and finally wed the most desirable man I could find. And I found you desirable from the first. The problem was, a professor’s salary wouldn’t support me in the style to which my mother and father would like me to become accustomed. But these ‘problems’ of yours have solved everything. From what I’ve read in the newspapers, the proceeds from your crimes—including the one tonight—are ample to support a couple in the lap of luxury.”

“Lauren, let me get this

straight. You followed me up here just to get evidence against me?”

She nodded eagerly.

“But you don’t intend to turn me over to the police? And now you’re proposing marriage to me?”

“I know it’s old-fashioned, but Mommy wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s the perfect match. I get a witty, distinguished husband and a chance to spend those delightful dollars you’ve received through the efforts of your class. You get my silence in regard to your criminal activities.” Her hands traveled lovingly down her shapely body. “And all the rest of me.”

“Would you consider some other arrangement?”

She shook her head. “I knew you’d never consider proposing under the usual circumstances, so I had to take matters into my own hands. Thank you for being a crook, Colin. Otherwise we might never have found each other.”

“But sooner or later they’ll discover—”

“I’ve always wanted to live in Argentina, sweetheart.”

His head spinning—but not from the champagne—Colin made his way to the kitchen of the house, followed by the chattering Lauren. “It’s all worked out for the best, Colin. Don’t you see? I can be very loving when there’s

enough nice green money involved.”

She sat down at the kitchen table. “Oh, it’s what I’ve always dreamed about. And you’re so adorable, darling. That little wisp of gray hair that sticks up at the back of your head just drives me wild! Simply wild! I think I knew from the first time I laid eyes on you that someday you’d get enough money to be worthy of me.”

Colin wasn’t listening. As he paced about the kitchen, glancing now and then at the delightful collection of bumps and curves that were Lauren Oakes’, hideous thoughts kept flitting through his mind.

Wet stockings draped over a shower-curtain bar.

His heart pumping madly as he tried to keep up with the wild gyrations that passed for dancing among the younger generation.

Babies, dribbling stewed prunes down the front of his best tweed jackets.

Lauren’s arm, linked possessively in his, growing chubbier as the years went by; a constant reminder that he was bound to another, not by love but by matrimonial blackmail.

Then too, there was something

else. The money he’d collected through his “extracurricular activities” was quite sufficient to keep one person in luxury for a lifetime—but it wasn’t nearly enough for two.

He shook his head, bringing himself back to reality. He felt something between his fingers; a wooden hammer, used by his frugal aunt to tenderize meat.

As Lauren babbled on, Colin found himself staring fixedly at the back of her head . . .

“Now then, class, I hope you enjoyed your weekend and are fully rested for this exam. Instead of the usual test, I’ve decided to give you a Final Problem, as Mr. Sherlock Holmes would say.”

The laughter that followed was quite out of proportion to Colin’s modest attempt at humor. Many of the students had to pass this test in order to graduate. He was sure they’d do their best. With a tiny smile he looked over at the vacant chair where Lauren Oakes would have sat had she been present. He began passing out the papers.

“Today we have **PROBLEM ELEVEN—WHERE TO HIDE THE BODY . . .**”

Everyone is aware of woman's proverbial "way to a man's heart," but such cognizance may also bestir certain belated reservations.

No Questions

Walking through the narrow side streets of Cannes toward the distant port, Burdick found himself studying his reflection in the shop windows he passed.

Had they made his hair too blond? He would be able to tell, when he returned to the villa, from his wife's expression as she saw him. Ling Li's lovely face mirrored every emotion. Meanwhile there would be nobody in Cannes who knew him or would notice that he had changed the color of his hair. He would avoid the shops where he was a familiar customer and have a drink in some waterfront café where he was unknown.

As he hurried along the busy street, thronged with shoppers, he felt another faint twinge of pain in his stomach. They had started again after lunch as he drove down the hill from the villa into the city.

Was it possible he could be getting another ulcer? He had developed that last one near the end of World War II when he was sail-

Asked

ing on merchant ships loaded with munitions, and after the war it had taken several years to get rid of it. These pains were not so severe as those had been; at least not yet.

When he got back to the villa this afternoon he would take one of his pills. Meanwhile, maybe a glass of wine would help.

This pain couldn't have been caused by anything he'd eaten for lunch. His wife had prepared a plain omelette and a salad. Ling Li was a great cook, and not only

Chinese style. She cooked better French food than the local maid they hired when he bought the villa.

He had drunk only one glass of white wine with lunch; no coffee, nothing to cause his discomfort. He would just put it out of his mind. The pain was beginning to ease.

He saw his reflection again, in the window of a pharmacy. Looked years younger with blond hair—in his early forties—closer to

his wife's age, instead of sixty-seven.

Ling Li had been talking for weeks about going to a new supper club in Juan-les-Pins and he had promised to take her this evening. She would spend all afternoon with the maid, preparing dinner and selecting what she would wear tonight, the pair of them talking and giggling like schoolgirls. Whatever Ling Li decided to wear she would be the most beautiful woman in the sup-



per club. People would, as usual, turn to stare at her. He would be proud that she was his wife.

He glimpsed himself in another shop window. His light-brown jacket and tan slacks looked fine with the new blond hair—good for his ego. He had been feeling low lately. Anything wrong with his health always depressed him.

Turning a corner onto the boulevard edging the harbor, his spirits rose immediately. The sight of all those beautiful yachts riding at anchor always made him feel better. The water in the Golfe de la Napoule, beyond the open port, was a brilliant blue in the afternoon sunshine, not a cloud in the sky.

On the boulevard the usual clutter of tourists were wandering aimlessly along the quai, most of them dressed in ridiculous clothes; women in tight shorts, their husbands wearing hideous sport shirts. They weren't all Americans. Some were Japanese, and he could hear cockney and German accents as he walked among them.

One middle-aged fat woman with dyed blonde hair reminded him of an albino hippo he had seen years ago in Africa. She even had the same waddle as she walked. What was he thinking! Fat women with dyed hair? His own hair was dyed now. At least

his weight hadn't changed an ounce in thirty years. Had to watch that, now he was retired.

A finger of pain quivered through his gut. Damn! Maybe he should have driven over to Nice and paid a visit to old Mourey. The doctor was in his office most afternoons at this hour, and would see him without an appointment—but why bother? The old Frenchman would only give him more of those same pills and mutter about ulcers again.

No! He would have a cool glass of wine. That should ease his tensions—although what the devil was he doing with tensions these days? He had all the money he would ever need, hidden away in Swiss banks. His last smuggling job had taken care of that. He had a beautiful young wife and a fine villa overlooking the Mediterranean. No worries of any kind, so he should have no tensions.

Burdick noticed a sidewalk café he had never patronized, with empty tables in the shade, under an awning. He selected a corner table, pulled out a chair and sat down facing the harbor.

An aged waiter appeared from inside. "M'sieur?"

"Half a bottle of champagne."

"Certainly, M'sieur."

Burdick watched the waiter disappear into the dim café. He

would drink two glasses of champagne! That should take care of these twinges of pain. Champagne never harmed anybody . . .

He was aware of a young woman staring at his hair as she passed. Did she realize it had just been dyed? He looked away as she gave him a discreet smile of invitation. His days for that sort of fun and games were over. With a beautiful Chinese wife waiting at the villa he had no need for the girls of Cannes.

Having his hair dyed had taken courage. He had been shown colored photographs from which to select the color he wanted. He picked the one that seemed nearest to what he remembered his hair had been before it turned white ten years ago. After that, while they worked on it, he had closed his eyes and tried to give the impression that he was dozing.

"Pardon, M'sieur."

He looked up to see the waiter at his elbow with the wine, watched with anticipation as the man uncorked the bottle and filled a glass, then pushed the bottle back into a plastic ice bucket. The old man bowed and vanished inside again.

Burdick tasted the wine. Poor stuff, but at least it was cool to his throat. He discovered that he was thirsty. Must have been

warmer than he had realized, walking here after he left the hairdresser. Sipping the wine slowly, he felt his discomfort easing; no more probing finger of pain.

After he finished the wine he would walk back and pick up his car, drive home to the villa and have a nap before he showered and dressed for the evening.

The maid would serve apéritifs on the terrace before dinner. Ling Li was preparing Chinese food for tonight, strange and delicious.

He had phoned the supper club and made a reservation for ten o'clock. Should be pleasant. There was to be a new singer from Paris in the floor show. Ling Li would enjoy an evening out; first time in months, although she never complained.

He wasn't much for nightclubs since he retired or, for that matter, going anywhere in the evening. He had done that for too many years, in every port in the world, but he must go out more often for Ling Li's sake. Mustn't let her get bored with her new life. Take her to some of these galas here, during the summer. Maybe Monte Carlo next week; give her money to gamble at the Casino.

"Erik Burdick!"

He turned as the voice boomed

his name. At first, he saw only the dark bulk of a tall man against the reflection of sunlight on the sea. He squinted to see his face. "Yes?"

"Don't you recognize me? Chris Dannerman!"

"Chris? Couldn't see you because of the sun." The familiar face came into focus. "Sit down! Have a drink . . ."

"Need one. I've been walking." Dannerman edged his massive body onto a chair as the waiter approached. "Had to take care of some business."

"What'll it be?" Burdick asked.

"Double whisky. Water on the side and no ice." He removed his straw hat and dropped it onto another chair. "Recognized you right off, Erik, when I saw you sitting here. In spite of the hair."

"Oh! Yes . . . Had that done last year in New York. Like to keep looking young." He saw that his friend's hair was white.

"Still chasing the dames?"

"Well . . ."

"Never married, did you?"

Burdick hesitated. "No. Never did." No point in telling Dannerman the truth. He would spread the news of his marriage in every port he dropped anchor.

"Was afraid you might've married that Oriental chick I saw you with that night in Saigon. Three

years ago, wasn't it? You were loaded, pal." Talked about marrying the dame. I've been wondering ever since. Asked around but nobody seemed to know. They hadn't seen you . . ."

"Been traveling a lot."

"Ships?"

"Planes, these days. Retired from the sea two years ago."

"That's what I'll be doing in another year. Been looking for my last harbor."

"Last harbor?"

"Where I can settle down. Maybe Portugal. Want to buy myself a piece of land with a small villa. But with every comfort for my old age! All conveniences, including a good cook."

The waiter brought his whisky and water, then went to serve another table.

Dannerman picked up his drink. "*Vôtre santé, mon ami!*"

"*Santé!*" Burdick tossed off the wine that was left in his glass. "What're you doing in Cannes?" He filled the glass again.

Bannerman wiped his mouth on the back of a hairy fist. "I'm captain of the biggest damn yacht in this port. Owned by a Brazilian millionaire. We've been here a few days while the boss had some fun with a little actress who's making a film on the Riviera. He's gotten bored with her so we're

hauling anchor tonight. Off to the Greek Islands! What about you?"

"Leaving tomorrow. Flying to Paris."

"Can't tell you how relieved I am to hear you didn't marry that girl in Saigon. She was a beauty, the one I saw you with that night. You were feeling no pain when you said you wanted to marry her. What was her name?"

"Name? Don't remember."

"Ling something . . . I'd seen her before, in other bars. In fact, one night she made a play for me. Been lots of stories about these girls marrying ship captains."

"Stories?" Burdick straightened in his chair. "What do you mean? What kind of stories?"

"Heard about three such marriages recently. American ship captains who married Oriental girls. One was Chuck Saunders. You must've met him in some port . . ."

"Chuck and I are old drinking buddies from way back."

"He fell for a girl in Hong Kong. Met her in some bar or nightclub. That's where most of these girls hang out. Always looking for an older guy with dough who they can trick into marriage. Chuck got serious and this girl took him home after their third or fourth date to meet her mother. Probably some old dame she'd

rented for the night! Most times they tell you their father's dead, killed in the war or something like that."

Burdick frowned. That was what Ling Li had told him—her father died in the war—when she took him to that small apartment in Saigon where she lived with her mother . . .

"Chuck was serious so he gave them money, several thousand dollars for the mother, a lot more to the girl for a new wardrobe and a plane ticket to Hawaii where they planned to live after they got married. Also cash to grease some palms before she could leave Hong Kong."

He had paid Ling Li's mother three thousand dollars, another five thousand to Ling Li for expenses and . . .

"Usually in these cases," Dannerman continued, "there's a young guy—says he's a brother or cousin—turns up later, after they get married. Actually they're no relation. He's her protector, her pimp!"

Ling Li's cousin! He had met him in Saigon but recently the guy had shown up in Paris, working in a restaurant . . .

The champagne suddenly tasted flat to Burdick's palate. "What are you getting at, man? These Oriental girls you say marry ship cap-

tains? What's your point?" he asked.

"Seems they've all gone back to where they started—with their protectors—Hong Kong, Saigon and Manila. Opened their own fancy bars or nightclubs."

"And their husbands?"

"I've personally heard about three of them—Chuck Saunders and two others. Dead within a few years after they got married. That's why I was worried about you, old friend."

"Chuck Saunders dead! What happened?"

"Natural causes, of course, like all the others; stomach, liver or ulcer . . . At least that's what the authorities said in each case, after they held autopsies."

"What the hell are you saying?"

"Orientals have poisons unknown to modern science. Thousands of years old! They kill you without leaving a trace. All these girls have a taste for two things—murder and money! When their husbands die they collect fortunes. Savings and insurance. Everything!"

Burdick felt a quiver of pain

stirring inside of him once again.

"Told you I'm looking for a last harbor where I can settle down after I retire. Got plenty of dough put away, but I'll be alone, mate. No little Oriental beauty smiling and bowing all the time, while she's slipping dried dragon blood or something into my chow!"

The worm of pain in his gut became a giant snake, coiling and thrashing. Burdick finished his wine in one gulp and set the glass down.

He knew what he would have to do when he returned to the villa, could feel Ling Li's throat, even now, between his fingers—her delicate neck, twisting like a snake . . .

He relaxed again as he studied the Swede's smiling face. "You have room for one more passenger on that yacht?" he asked.

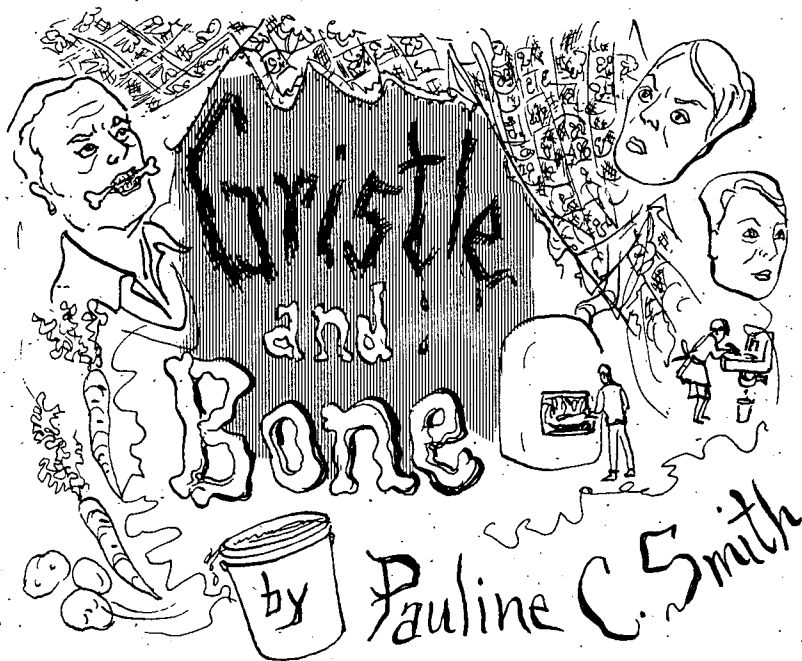
"What passenger?"

"Me, of course. No questions asked."

"Sure thing, pal. Come aboard any time after dark. I'll be looking for you." He winked. "No questions asked."



Between fact and fancy, one may find a truth that was better left unrevealed.



Dr. Horowitz noted, from the case history before him, that Gordon Ware had been a patient of this and other institutions through thirty of his forty-three years. He also noted that the patient, diagnosed as schizophrenic, had undergone, variously, ataractic drug treatment, electroshock and psychotherapy, as well as a combina-

tion of these; but that, at present, he was receiving only "reasonable health care with no specific treatment included," which meant that the hospital had given up on him.

The doctor, a recent addition to the staff, eager and confident, felt sure that if only he could separate fact from fancy in Gordon's sick memory, pure truth would emerge

and the mind would eventually be healed . . .

"Let's go over it again now, Gordon," Dr. Horowitz said kindly.

"Go over what?" asked Gordon.

"Your life. Your memories. And together we will try to separate fact from fancy and come up with the truth."

"What I can't understand," argued Gordon reasonably, "is how I'll be able to separate fact from fancy if what I tell are fanciful facts or factual fancies and I am not sure which is which."

"You just tell it all," the doctor said, "and I will help you with the separation to come up with the truth. The truth will make you well, Gordon." He smiled benignly, sat back, and folding his hands on the clipboard, prepared to listen. "Start from the beginning, Gordon."

"The beginning of memory, you mean?" asked Gordon.

Dr. Horowitz nodded.

"Well, I shall try. But fact and fancy are greatly tangled and intermingled in my mind. Truth is confused with untruth. False memory stumbles through warped observations . . ."

"That's all right. You just tell it, Gordon."

"In the beginning, I was very young. How young is very? That

depends on the adult who remembers and/or the child who experiences the incident to remember. Incident? There were many. I did not experience them, nor the fancies either. I observed only. I was the observer who crept down the basement steps and saw the masks—I, the little boy who squatted before the big stone crock."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Dr. Horowitz. "Think now, it is time to separate fact from fancy."

"I *am* thinking, and I *am* trying to remember correctly. I can *feel* the very *texture* of the basement steps, and *smell* the *crock*. Even now, I can see the old house where we all lived together. Tall, slim, gray-bricked—*antediluvian* is the word for the house, and *antisocial* for those who lived inside."

"Come now, Gordon," interrupted Dr. Horowitz, "maybe it was you, only you, who were the antisocial one . . ."

"The house and we inside the house were shunned by society, but maybe I only remember it that way—a child's conception of people scurrying past on flying feet—and it might be that their steps were rapid only because they desired to get where they were going quickly before their shoe leather wore out. 'Everybody is going places but you,' She cried

out to Him in my memory—they, my father and mother whom I must call He and She, Him and Her, because I cannot remember their names . . .”

“Of course you can remember their names,” chided Dr. Horowitz. “Think. Think hard. You are evading the issue.”

Gordon thought with furrowed brow and clenched teeth, and spoke at last. “If it is evading the issue,” he said with finality, “still I must call them He and She, Him and Her as I remember Her voice crying out to Him, ‘Other people are trying and climbing out of this Depression, but you just wear out your shoe leather standing in your feet,’ which made Him laugh in a wry manner.”

“Why? Do you think—”

“Why what?”

“Why the wry manner?”

“It was *His* wryness, not mine.” Gordon shrugged.

“All right, then what?” asked the doctor.

“Then She cried, ‘Empty the crock,’ but He did not—until it dripped over the sides onto the linoleum.”

“The crock?” the doctor asked.

“The crock was as tall as I when I squatted in front of it. It stood under the U-shaped pipe that grew out of the kitchen sink. I squatted and stared at it, listen-



ing to the water drop from the leak in the pipe, and trying not to breathe in the smell.

“‘It smells in the sink where I wash and scrape the carrots and potatoes for the pot,’ She cried out to Him. ‘Be glad you’ve got potatoes and carrots to wash and scrape for the pot,’ He answered. ‘Empty the crock!’ She cried. But He was gone, out into the sunshine with the carrot plants and potato vines, or down in the basement with the masks.”

"Masks?" asked the doctor.

"How do I know they were masks? How do I remember? He told me what they were. 'Masks,' He said grudgingly, as if He did not wish to speak of them to a stranger."

"Come on," Dr. Horowitz said, "you were no stranger. You were his son . . ."

"His son, the stranger, when He spoke of the masks, the half faces. I don't really mean *half* faces, for the faces were whole but with no backs on them, no backs of the heads, but with faces in front. Smiling, laughing, frowning and quiet. With big, empty eyes. 'What are those things?' I asked and recoiled. 'Masks,' He said, as if I were a stranger. He molded them . . . with His fingers . . . in clay. I watched His fingers press and stroke and form the features into a smile, a frown, or nothing at all, and they all looked like Her. He did not know, or ignored the fact that I was there, the stranger."

The doctor shifted uneasily.

"The basement was unfinished. Well, now, I mean the basement had steps going down to it and there was an oil furnace down there on a cement slab, with a cement wall behind it and on one side of it; but the rest of the basement was dirt; floor and walls. All

dirt. He molded the masks as if I were not there watching Him, but as if He were surrounded by dirt walls and dirt floor—and the masks—the masks and dirt, while She screamed at me, 'Don't go down in the basement. It's dirty,' at which He smiled sadly and offered a few words to me, the stranger: 'I put wax in this long-handled pan and open the furnace door, holding it in the flame to let it melt.' *Melt!* A word I tried in my mouth, to find that it blistered the insides of my cheeks."

"All right, now. All right, Gordon. A word cannot blister. Stick to the facts," the doctor said with some heat.

"Try it," said Gordon. "Try it in *your* mouth. 'In the furnace, Daddy?' I asked Him, remembering His name at last."

"Good," complimented Dr. Horowitz.

"He did not answer, for He had forgotten me. 'Are you putting Mama in the furnace?' I asked, finally remembering Her name too."

The doctor smiled and nodded.

"Of course not," Daddy said with a frown, and his hand shook on the handle of the pan—either with anger or desire—I know not which. When the wax was melted, he poured it into the clay and broke the mold, and there was

Mama—smiling or frowning or being nothing at all.”

Dr. Horowitz thinned his stiffly upturned lips. “What are you trying to suggest, Gordon? That your father burned your mother in effigy?”

“Didn’t He?”

“No, he did not. That’s just one of your sadistic fantasies.”

“Or a masochistic one.”

“Whichever,” said the doctor with impatience. “The true fact is, your father was an artist, frustrated and demeaned by the Depression, forced to spend his talent in the basement . . .”

“And my mother?”

“All right. How about your mother? Tell me about her.”

“I, whose head is bursting with fanciful fact as well as factual fancy, remember Mama at the sink, scraping the carrots and potatoes, and crying out in anguish, ‘Empty the crock!’”

“Oh, come on. You must remember more than that about your mother.”

“I must?” asked Gordon.

“Yes,” the doctor said implacably.

“She moved about, above the basement of course, through the rooms, with a cloth and a sharp needle . . .”

“A cloth and *needle*?”

“When She let the words drip,

now and then, to Her son, the stranger . . .”

“There you go again with the stranger-bit,” sighed the doctor.

“ . . . To me, the stranger, She let these words drip now and then, not as if She were dripping them on a child, her son, but as if She were sprinkling them on the air, hoping they would slip through the floorboards, down into the basement. ‘I am trying to keep things neat and clean and bright and polished,’ She dripped her words as She scrubbed with the cloth. And ‘I am trying to make things pretty,’ as She basted her needle brightly through the torn parts of the yellowed lace curtains . . .”

Dr. Horowitz jerked brightly alert. “Don’t you see?” he cried. “There is the whole thing in a nutshell. Your mother wanted nice surroundings, a nice, orderly life, which your father could not give to her during a depression that was grinding him down . . .”

“I sat often on the basement stairs, halfway between the basement and the kitchen, thinking about Him and Her, remembering their names, Daddy and Mama, the names melting in my mouth and blistering the insides of my cheeks. ‘Come up here,’ She called. I mean Mama. ‘Come up here and act like a real boy.

Come up and slide down the banister or take a clock apart. Like a boy, a real boy.' So I went up the stairs and slid down the upstairs banister, like an unreal boy, and hit my head and She, my Mama, said I was no real boy of Hers. So I was a stranger upstairs as well as in the basement." Gordon looked up, his gray eyes filled with childish perspicacity and mature bewilderment.

The doctor, uneasy, cleared his throat and began his speech, "Well, but you're blowing it all up—"

"Then I took apart a clock and left the wheels and gears and screws and arms and hands on the floor and She flew into a rage, my Mama did, and said what did I mean, breaking up the only clock in the house that worked? 'There are plenty of clocks that don't work,' She screamed at me, the stranger, 'so you pick the only one that does.' She was furious—"

"Of course she was furious," interrupted Dr. Horowitz with excitement, "not with you but with your father, whose talent lay in the creative arts that gave her nothing during the Depression and not with a salaried job and the ability to repair a leaky pipe to give her life order and serenity."

"She swept up the clock parts and threw them in the crock with

the smelly water," Gordon said.

"That didn't happen," accused Dr. Horowitz, outraged. "You've got a hang-up about crocks . . ."

"And masks," reminded Gordon.

"And masks," agreed the doctor, rearranging his face blandly. "Go on," he said, his voice long-suffering. "Go on, and this time try to get it right."

"I am trying. After She swept up the clock parts and threw them in the crock with the smelly water, Mama called down the basement stairs to Daddy, 'Come up and empty the crock.' He did not answer."

"You know," exclaimed Dr. Horowitz, "the crock and the masks are symbols."

"Cymbals, yes," said Gordon, "I hear them clanging in my head."

"The crock," explained Dr. Horowitz with feigned patience, "is a symbol of the Depression, a time when there was no money to get things fixed and your father, the artist, had not the technical know-how to fix them himself nor the mundane ability to keep up with them . . ."

"Clang," said Gordon softly.

"The masks are symbols too," explained Dr. Horowitz wearily, "symbols of your mother's conservative and conformative desire to be the protected and indulged housewife of an ordinarily salaried

husband . . .” The doctor sighed.

“Clang, clang,” said Gordon.

“ . . . Not the wife of an artist, during a depression, with his head in the clouds.”

“The cymbals clang greatly,” cried Gordon, shaking his head. “Cymbals of masks and crocks, of a stranger in the kitchen and a stranger in the basement; of the antediluvian house standing among the potatoes and carrots that have been firmly planted in the yard . . . ‘What is in the crock, Mama?’ I asked the pretty woman whose cheeks fell sadly against Her jaws. ‘In the crock?’ She looked bewildered. ‘The crock under the sink. Did you put Daddy in the crock?’ She held her nose: ‘The crock smells. I would never put Daddy in the crock.’ Her eyes looked above me as if I were a stranger, and bent their eyesight around me as if I were not there.”

“Ridiculous!” interrupted Dr. Horowitz.

“I turn my own eyes inward and backward, and I remember how She hated the crock, refusing to go near it except when She had to, while She was scraping carrots and peeling potatoes in the sink . . . She would not drown Daddy in the crock.”

“Naturally, not,” agreed Dr. Horowitz.

“Did you bury Daddy then,

out with the carrots and potatoes?” I asked Her.

“She glanced at me with disfavor. ‘That would be a terrible waste, with only enough land for the carrots and potatoes,’ She said with contempt. ‘Would you have me dig those up? They are our vegetables to go with the meat.’

“With my boy-spine crawling as I smelled the greasy aroma of roasting meat, I cried, ‘We have no meat!’”

“All right. All right, now,” interrupted Dr. Horowitz in a rage, “you’re way out again. Keep to the *facts!*”

“‘Who is the meat?’ I asked Her. ‘Your Daddy,’ she smiled, a bit of gristle caught between her teeth.”

“Omigod!” Dr. Horowitz held his head in his hands. “You mean you think she *ate* him?”

Gordon’s gray eyes turned cloudy with confusion. “Daddy kept the furnace going even in the summer, sticking in the long-handled pan, heating up the wax, the wax that smelled like roasting meat to the stranger seated on the basement stairs, halfway between up and down, the smell melting in my mouth and blistering the insides of my cheeks. . . . I called to Daddy down in the dirt with the cement on two sides of Him . . . I called, ‘Daddy, are you

cooking Mama?" and he laughed, the piece of bone between his teeth clanging like cymbals."

"Omigod!" Dr. Horowitz raised his head. "Now you think *he* ate *her*?"

"Didn't He? And didn't She?" asked Gordon, his gray eyes steady and studied. "Didn't my mama eat my daddy, and my daddy eat my mama, leaving me, the stranger, alone?"

"No! Oh, no." Dr. Horowitz straightened and tapped his clipboard. "Those are your fantasies, Gordon. Here are the facts. Your mother and father had, indeed, a rocky time through the Depression. They did subsist on potatoes and carrots as you remember. They lived in an antediluvian house just as you so graphically described, and there was a crock that annoyed your mother . . ."

Gordon nodded.

"And your father did, as you have told it, immerse himself in his talent, plying his craft as best he could—probably down in the basement . . ."

"Yes," said Gordon.

"But it didn't end the way you think it did, Gordon. Not at all. No way . . ." Dr. Horowitz seemed nervous, eager to press his point.

Gordon leaned forward on the edge of the cot. His hands, which

had been hanging limp between his knees, fisted. "Yes?" he said. "Well, give me the facts."

"The facts are that once the Depression was over, your mother and father began to climb slowly out of their dilemma. He was finally able to follow his profession—with profit—and she no longer had to contend with a crock in the kitchen and torn curtains on the windows."

Gordon looked at him with unbelieving eyes.

"That's true, Gordon. Those are facts. And they no longer had nothing but potatoes and carrots to eat . . ."

"They had meat," said Gordon stubbornly. "They had each other."

"No, no, no, Gordon. Try and separate fact from fancy. They are alive, your mother and father. They come and see you, now and then they come and visit you. In this very room. Remember?"

Gordon stood. "Now and then they come and visit," he repeated after the doctor. "Now and then, and I remember lively dots of heel sounds along the corridor floor, accompanied by slip-sliding, snake-in-the-grass steps, then they enter, He and She, and they are strangers . . ."

"They are *not*!" cried the doctor. "They are your *parents*."

Gordon bent forward, eyes intent. "Mama and Daddy, you mean?"

"Right!" The doctor smiled. He had broken through at last, broken through the past and into the present.

"Mama and Daddy," said Gordon with wonderment. "Mama did not eat Daddy and Daddy did not eat Mama. Instead, they come and visit me here."

"Exactly!" The doctor stood. The clipboard clattered to the floor: "You're getting it, Gordon! You are, at last, separating your fancies from the facts. Now you will find the truth, and the truth will make you well." The doctor waited.

Gordon moved slowly around the cot and backed up against the wall. He wound his arms around himself and touched the wall with the tips of his fingers as if to find solace in its comforting strength. "Well, then," he said to the waiting doctor, "with the fancies gone and the facts remaining, there is only one truth."

The doctor tensed and his eyes

widened with great anticipation.

"Mama must have washed me in the crock and Daddy placed me in the long-handled pan . . ."

The doctor started.

"Then while Daddy held me in the furnace flame, Mama basted me with her basting needle . . ."

The doctor sagged and drew in his breath.

"Then they ate *me*, Mama and Daddy, She chewing the gristle between Her teeth and He clanging the cymbal bone."

Dr. Horowitz bent down and picked up his clipboard from the floor.

Gordon unwound his arms from around himself and spread them wide, against the wall. With his head cast back and his eyes closed, he said softly, "And I have been digested, year after year after year after year . . ."

The doctor turned and looked at Gordon with a final grave and compassionate understanding. "You know," he said just as softly, "I think you have come up with the facts and found the truth. And now you are, unfortunately, well."



One must always consider the possibility that a manifestly plausible solution to a problem, if pursued, could become hauntingly devastating.



THE SULPHUR ROOM

by
Donald Olson

At that hour of the day when it was already twilight among the skyscrapers, there remained yet enough good north light in the studio just east of St. Mark's Place in the Village to encourage the painter Saul Hanks to finish the work he was doing on Culver Copeland's ear, an ear that annoyed the painter not so much because its faintly noticeable outward flair affected the symmetry of the model's head but because it was one of those minute details that could conceivably wreck

Saul's ambitious scheme, a scheme which, needless to say, would have astounded the young man perched so tirelessly upon the dais.

"Wouldn't it have been simpler," he inquired, "to have had me turned the other way?"

Saul's reply was a good-natured snarl of contempt. "I don't want simplicity, my dear fellow, I want truth."

Copeland replied with a burst of laughter. "Truth? You've been painting me now for two weeks and not even my own mother would recognize me in any of those portraits. I look like a fish in every one of them. If you weren't paying me so well I'd be damned offended."

"I happen to be in my piscine period, so I'm afraid that's unavoidable."

He'd been in his taurine period, his *late* taurine period when Vanessa Felton had seen his work and commissioned him to do the portrait of her late husband which now hung in the lobby of the Felton Building uptown, staring down

at the public exactly like a bull ready to charge. Vanessa had been delighted with the portrait and had commissioned one of herself; by then, Saul was in his early feline period and Vanessa had been so flattered by the sleek svelte image of herself that had communicated itself to the painter from his sitter's chunky, graceless body that she had pursued him, wooed him, invited him to cozy parties at the Hickories, her estate on the south shore of Long Island, and had eventually talked him into marrying her.

"Besides," he added, stepping back to appraise his own work with a savagely critical eye, "the representation of an object has nothing at all to do with art. To quote the Malevitch manifesto."

"Never heard of him."

"He was one of the pioneers of Abstract painting."

Saul himself had felt like a pioneer before marrying the wealthy Vanessa, not because he was breaking new ground in the art world but because he had to slave so hard for a living while trying to pursue his career as a painter. Vanessa's promise to free him from such artistically trammeling hardships had proved irresistible and at first the arrangement appeared ideal. He had gained economic freedom, Vanessa had ac-

quired a handsome young husband with both physical appeal and undeniable talent, and although he upheld his end of the bargain he soon discovered that Vanessa had wanted more from him than he was prepared to give, wanting to possess him totally, to have him constantly on a leash, to parade him boastfully before her friends, wanting him to put his duties as an escort and his function as a mate above his responsibilities as an artist, conditions of servitude he found altogether loathsome.

Now, Saul smiled as he saw the young actor he was painting begin to grow restive. "As it happens, Cully, I have a surprise for you today. If you'll be patient about five minutes longer."

Saul submerged himself in his work, deaf to the acid rock from which the painter on the floor below drew his inspiration and to the pattering and jabbering of neophyte ballerinas across the hall, blind to the activities plainly visible in the sculptor's studio beyond the window even when the sculptor, Tonio Latto, stopped what he was doing and came to his window and gazed sternly at Saul's work in progress, which he could see as clearly as Saul could see the emerging human form in the block of marble in Latto's studio. The studios were part of an

artistic enclave where no one bothered or interfered with anyone else unless invited to do so, but where each artist was conscious of those around him, as if they were all tacitly engaged in the creation of one great universal work of art. On her single visit to the studio, Vanessa had been appalled at the noise and lack of absolute privacy and had insisted that Saul paint her own portrait at the Hickories. Once they were married, she tried her best to make him give up the Village studio and do all his painting at home, an idea he found too repugnant even to discuss.

At the end of five minutes Saul stepped aside and beckoned the actor to view the result of the afternoon's work.

Copeland did so with an air of smiling distrust, as if expecting another fishlike representation of his handsome features, and Saul watched with amusement as the actor took a hasty glance at the canvas, his face registering surprise at first and then bewildered curiosity.

"Do you like it?" Saul asked.

"Like it? Yes. But I don't understand. It is me, and yet . . ." He studied Saul's face and then looked again at the portrait. "It's you, too . . . Yes, it's as much you as it is me."

"Not at all. It's you, Cully, the way you would look if you were to wear your hair longer, do something with your eyebrows and grow a beard and moustache like mine."

Copeland seemed unsure now of how he ought to react. "Is it a joke? You've had me standing there for hours, you've worked like a fiend yourself—to prove what? That you can paint a realistic likeness?"

"To prove a point, my friend."

"What point?"

"That I was right about you from the first time I saw you."

It had been early in September when Vanessa, who did a great deal of cultural slumming, had dragged him to some off-off-off-Broadway theater called the Backyard Playhouse to see a confusing farce called *Ladybugs and Dragonflies*, a boring evening that would have been unbearably tedious had Saul not been attracted to one of the actors in a secondary role. The fellow did not resemble Saul in any outward way and yet Saul was struck by certain basic facial and bodily likenesses and he thought how closely the actor would resemble him by effecting various minor changes. The physique and facial bone structure, the contours of the skull, all the fundamentals were

remarkably similar and Saul had been curious enough, without fully understanding the source of his curiosity, to look up the actor's name in the program. It was Culver Copeland.

At first he had dismissed the bizarre idea that the actor's appearance had initiated, but it had continued to nag at him until he went out of his way to learn more about Copeland, and the more he learned the more ideal an instrument the young man appeared to be for his purpose. He was a bachelor who had come to New York from Indiana to try his luck in the theater, with no experience to speak of and with no other equipment but a pleasing appearance and a spoonful of talent, assets that had given him little, if any, leverage in the profession and left him eking out an existence waiting on tables and doing occasional modeling jobs. By this time Saul had become convinced that the scheme he was hatching had enough merit to pursue further and he'd had no trouble in hiring Copeland to model for him. The actor had the simple trust of a child, a degree of self-blinding vanity, and the pecuniary insufficiency to make him the perfect tool.

"Right about me?" said the actor. "How? That with a bit of

vegetation on my kisser we'd be look-alikes?"

"In part, yes. But listen, we're both tired. I've told Vanessa I wouldn't be home till very late tonight and if you had any idea what a labor of Hercules *that* involved you wouldn't dream of saying no when I invite you out to dinner. There's a place over on West Fourth that serves a cream of broccoli soup you won't believe, a smashing lime-broiled breast of chicken, and a chiffon pie that's sheer heaven."

The actor was not about to turn down such an offer and yet that same childlike wariness gleamed in his dark-blue eyes. "I get the feeling this is some sort of occasion. Could it be that you won't be requiring my services any longer as a model?"

"You'd be half right. Only half."

After enjoying the delicacies with which Saul tempted his palate, the actor was in no mood to be disparaging, although he had to confess the idea made little sense to him.

"Let me get this straight," he whispered, leaning across the table as if Saul had suggested something patently illicit. "You want me to grow a beard and all the rest and impersonate you on Wednesdays, and for this you'll pay me two

hundred bucks a week? What's the catch?"

"No catch, buddy. I've explained it all. Diane and I met and fell in love. But we're both married. Vanessa is pathologically jealous and Diane's old man is even worse. But he goes out of town every Wednesday and we can be together then; but only if I'm careful to cover myself."

"But, hell, man, it's not just looking like you. I've never even picked up a paintbrush."

Saul smiled. "You've watched me, Cully, the way an actor watches another person. You know damned well you could play the role of a painter with absolute authority. The main one you've got to fool is Tonio, and he's only going to glance over at you occasionally. Marie Adanour, across the hall, will only wave and say hi, and the waiters in Gino's are not going to question you. You know my routine. Why do you think I had you modeling for me for two weeks? Look, I don't *know* that Vanessa has spies. Maybe I'm being paranoid. But I can't take that chance. If I say I'm going to the studio as usual on Wednesdays and don't go near the place and she should happen to find out, man, I've cooked my goose—and I'm not about to throw away what I've got with her. It's

just that simple, Cully. You dig?"

"But what if she phones?"

"You know there's no phone in the studio."

"She might come there. What then?"

"She won't. She never does. And she'd never come on Wednesday. That's the servants' day off. She never leaves the house on Wednesdays. Hell, she hardly gets out of bed."

"So how would you work it?"

"Easy. I drive in as usual, stop at the Claremore and buy a paper in the lobby, scoot up to your room, change places with you. You go down, jump in the car and go to the studio. I disguise myself a bit and go off to meet Diane. I'm back at your place at six."

"And for this I get two hundred bucks? You must be nuts."

"Maybe, but you haven't seen Diane. She's something special."

Like most actors, Cully was not too analytical; the drama itself is what intrigued him, that and the money, of course, and it was all much easier to arrange than Saul had expected. On his way home that night his confidence could not have been stronger.

It was the visibility factor on which he was counting to give himself an airtight alibi when he took the regrettable but unavoidable step of killing Vanessa, the

fact that his presence at the studio on a particular Wednesday would be confirmed by witnesses who would have seen him but would have been too preoccupied with their own artistic endeavors, he was sure, to have noticed that his left ear, for instance, was a bit more protuberant than usual.

His mood was so sanguine when he got home that evening that not even Vanessa's calculated ill-humor could destroy it.

"I suppose you're going to be pulling this stunt all the time now," she complained. "This time of year."

"So what's this time of year got to do with it?"

"The fogs. You know how I hate the fog, what it does to my nerves."

"The servants are here. You've nothing to be afraid of."

"This *client* you had to meet for dinner—blonde or brunette?"

"Blond, six-foot-two, and male. Or don't you even trust me with another male?"

"You're an artist. How *can* I trust you?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to, darling."

She pouted. "There is no point in your being so infernally stubborn about that lousy studio of yours. Most painters would give anything to have a place like this

to work in, and you well know it."

"There's one thing I wouldn't give, my dear, and it's the one thing you'd require—my artistic independence. Thanks, but I'll keep the studio."

The Wednesday masquerade worked beautifully and by the fourth week Cully had conquered whatever stage fright he might have suffered and was getting an enormous kick out of his performance, as Saul had assured him he would, and had thrown himself so assiduously into his role that he was even turning out some not altogether discreditable imitations of Saul's work. He had grown quite bold, furthermore, in greeting his fellow artists in the adjoining studios, none of whom displayed the slightest doubt as to his identity, and he would wave through the window at Tonio Latto as if challenging the sculptor to penetrate his disguise.

Finally Saul decided it was pointless to delay any longer, and it was on the evening before the crucial Wednesday that Vanessa sprang her little surprise.

"How do you like it, darling? Isn't it fabulous?"

She'd had the old carriage house converted into a studio, the most thoroughly equipped studio Saul had ever seen, an absolute dream of a studio, a studio any

painter might have craved to possess.

She gave him a pinch. "Well, don't just stand there gaping. Say something. Isn't it much superior to that dreadful attic in the Village?"

He admitted that it was.

She linked her arm in his. "Confess now. Wouldn't you love to work here?"

He looked down at her and spoke the truth. "Yes, my dear. I would."

She couldn't quite believe her luck. "Do you mean that?"

"Of course."

"And you *will* work here?"

"Yes."

Her plump, over-painted face seemed to expand even further with thrilled delight. "You do honestly *mean* it, Saul?"

"Indeed I do. My lease expires on the studio next week, as a matter of fact. Then I'll give it up."

"Oh, darling, you don't know how happy that makes me. I've been such a jealous fool."

They went to a party in Southampton that evening, at the Leverett Hudsons', and perhaps because she was in such a triumphant mood Vanessa drank altogether too much, which couldn't have pleased Saul more; she would be in bed till at least noon the next day. So much the

better; the less pain she suffered, the less of an ordeal would it be for him.

Another blessing: the fog was unusually thick the following morning, a gray dense curtain to help conceal his actions from any inadvertently curious eyes. Too, as he drove into the city the car radio, for a change, seemed to play only those songs he liked, mellow, evocative ballads rich in spiritual nostalgia and soothing to the nerves as a mild sedative. He thought of Cully and was sorry the actor must remain ignorant of the very real drama in which he would be playing a supporting role that morning, a morning whose routine followed the same path as on the preceding Wednesdays.

There was that certain moment in Cully's room just as the actor was about to open the door and go out which always gave Saul a peculiar and pleasurable jolt, when Cully would reach for the doorknob and pause, looking around at Saul with a tight little courageous sly smile. Saul knew it was probably the same expression Cully wore backstage as he awaited his cue to step forward into the footlights, and the uncanny sensation of watching himself separate into two distinct personalities would come over Saul;

the real Saul Hanks would go out that door and the man left behind in the shabby hotel room would be that man's disreputable alter ego, a creature capable of hideous deeds, part monster, part madman, the guy one hired to do one's dirty work.

He left the building and took the subway to Queens where he rented a car under a false name. Then he drove out to the Island through fog-haunted Freeport and Bay Shore and Patchogue thinking all the time, almost as a stranger would think, with no more emotion than a stranger would feel, of the house he was going to and of the woman asleep in an upstairs bedroom, of the moves he would make, where he would park the car, how far he must walk, how he would unlock the back door and climb the back stairs and enter her room and place the pillow across her sleeping face . . .

All went as he imagined until he was standing in the open doorway of that bedroom. At first, the empty bed did not seriously alarm him but when he saw no light in the adjacent bathroom and heard no sound but the grating murmur of the nearby surf all his confidence deserted him and he felt tricked and betrayed.

After searching all the rooms he went down to the garage and

found his worst fears confirmed: Vanessa's car was gone.

The contempt he'd felt for Vanessa changed then to hatred, as if she had interfered with his plan through some diabolical foreknowledge of his intentions, an altogether baseless assumption and he knew it; most likely she had awakened—or been awakened by a call from one of her friends—had seen the ugly gray mass of the fog surrounding the house and had escaped to be with someone.

Gradually he was able to organize his thoughts to deal with this contingency. Sooner or later she would have to return, hopefully alone, and he would simply wait for her and kill her when she arrived. All this was on the assumption that she would return within a couple or three hours, but as the time passed and no car entered the drive his nerves began to grow shredded and the outrageous possibility that it would have to be postponed to another Wednesday filled him with the bitterness of defeat. When the phone rang the first time he merely jumped, but when it rang again a half hour later and then almost every fifteen minutes, he became so rattled he could hardly sit still.

Knowing how long it would take him to get back to the Vil-

lage, he waited until the last possible minute and then had no choice but to abandon the plan and drive away, accompanied now by omens of disaster that raked his already throbbing nerves and caused him to make several reckless errors of judgment that nearly resulted in collisions with other cars. The fog was so dense that he was almost an hour later than usual getting to Cully's place.

Cully was already there, of course, pouring himself a drink and looking as rosy as Saul felt.

"Thank God you're here. What kept you?"

"The lousy fog."

"You better have a drink."

Saul shook his head. "No thanks."

Cully ignored this, shoved the glass into his hand. "Take it, man. You'll need it."

The actor's nervousness was suddenly apparent to Saul. "What's the matter with you?"

Cully looked at him. "Something terrible happened. Something really terrible, man."

"Don't tell me, I can guess. You blew your cover."

"I sure as hell did."

"So don't fall apart. Odds against it were pretty slim." He felt woefully depressed now; the whole scheme seemed to have washed out.

"So who tumbled to you?" Probably that smarty-pants waiter at Gino's.

Cully watched him with a tremulous, apologetic look. "Your wife."

Saul stared back. "Vanessa came to the studio?"

"Just after noon. Hell, man, I didn't know who it was. I let her in. You said she never came there."

"She never did."

"She started whining about the fog the minute she was inside, said she had to come, said there was something she had to tell me."

"Hold on." This was all too fantastic. "You mean she didn't know you weren't me?"

"Not at first. It was crazy, man. She was all wrapped up in what she was saying. Then all of a sudden she rushed into my arms and then—then it hit her. She sort of freaked out. I thought she was going to faint. I didn't know what the hell to do, man. She wanted to know who I was and what the hell I was doing there and everything."

Saul didn't really have to ask. "You spilled it all."

"Man, I had to. I didn't at first. I just gaped at her, stammering some sort of rubbish. Then she pulled the gun."

Vanessa always carried a gun in her purse; she was terrified of muggers.

"Then I told her. Everything. About you and Diane and our arrangement." Cully poured himself another drink. "She was mad; Saul. Didn't scream and holler but she was killing mad. That fool! That incompetent fool!" she kept saying."

Later, Saul knew he'd see the ludicrous aspect of it all. Now, he felt only the defeat.

"You've really creamed it for me, Cully. You really have. I suppose she went looking for Diane. That'll keep her busy."

"That's just it, Saul. She demanded I tell her where you were and where this Diane lived and she didn't believe me when I said I didn't know. That's when she got really nasty. She was steamed, man, and she came toward me with that revolver. 'Tell me or I'll kill you.' She kept saying it, and I knew she would, Saul. She would have killed me. I'd been stretching a canvas for you when she came in and I still had the stretcher bar in my hand and when she came toward me I threw it at her and then I jumped her. I didn't mean for it to happen, Saul. It was an accident, I swear. My hand didn't even touch the gun. It just went off in her hand. The bullet hit her

in the belly and she . . . she's dead, Saul."

Nothing Cully had said had prepared Saul for this, and yet he was astonished at the ease with which he absorbed it.

"Where is she?"

"Still there."

"You haven't told anyone?"

"Are you nuts? Man, I didn't know what to do."

"Someone must have seen you."

"No."

"Tonio?"

"No. I lucked out there. He'd just gone out for that two-hour siesta of his before she got there. I hid her body under some canvases and was making like the maestro with the brush when he came back." A curious sort of actor's pride shone for a moment in Cully's blue eyes. "I wanted to get the hell out of there but I didn't dare. I forced myself to stay till the usual time."

"Good man. You're sure no one heard the shot?"

"With that acid rock blasting the walls? No chance, man."

"Where's her car?"

"I don't know. I just locked up and split. What are we going to do?"

Saul leaned forward and pressed Cully's knee. "First of all, buddy, we're going to trust each other. Right?"

"Oh, right, man! I'm with you!"

Saul understood now what lay at the root of the actor's distress: he had been afraid that Saul would do nothing to help him out of this mess. Apparently it had not even occurred to Cully that he, Culver Copeland, was not even involved in the accident, that it had happened in Saul's studio and the victim was Saul's wife.

What Cully said next made it clear that he had thought about this but assumed Saul had nothing to worry about: "They couldn't possibly blame you for what happened. You've got a foolproof alibi."

"I have?"

Saul honestly, for that instant, couldn't imagine what it would be.

"Sure. Diane. She can account for your day."

Saul quickly put down the glass. He could detect neither suspicion nor duplicity in Cully's tone or look. "Well, yes, sure. She could. And she would if I asked her. But I wouldn't want to do that, Cully. That would get her in hot water with her husband."

"But maybe we'd better call the police. It *was* an accident."

"It would still look fishy to the cops. And when we tried to explain why you were impersonating

me . . . no way, Cully. We'd better handle it by ourselves."

Soon Saul found himself once more grooving with the action, deciding there was still a fifty-fifty chance that things would work out all right. They had no trouble finding Vanessa's car a block from the studio, miraculously unticketed. Saul drove it into the mews behind the studio, loaded the body in the trunk and then, with Cully following in Saul's car, drove all the way out to the Hickories without incident. They got the body into the house and staged it to look like suicide, Saul debating whether to forge a suicide note but deciding against it. He could always say that Vanessa had threatened suicide. Who could dispute it?

Back at the studio, Saul calmly worked on his latest painting for half an hour, then went downstairs and called the house. When there was no answer he phoned Peg Hudson and told her that he'd been trying to call Vanessa to find out how bad the fog was before deciding to stay in town, but couldn't get an answer.

Peg sounded properly concerned. "Saul, I've been ringing Vanessa all afternoon—we were supposed to play bridge at the club. She must have really zonked out after my party."

She agreed to drive over and check on Vanessa, Saul promising to call her back in fifteen minutes.

When he did, Peg's voice was a dead giveaway. "Fog's pretty bad, Saul, but you'd better come home right away. Something quite awful's happened."

Afterward, he was agreeably surprised at how unsuspectingly the suicide was accepted; the solicitude of the police was almost indecent and Saul was amused to find how speedily his dreams of well-heeled independence came true.

He and Cully had agreed to steer clear of each other until the whole matter was settled, and then one day Saul called the actor and asked him to come out to the Hickories.

Seeing it for the first time at his leisure and not swathed in blankets of fog, the estate's opulence boggled the young actor's mind; he'd had no idea it was so vast, while the studio itself left him more than impressed.

"Has she been here?" he inquired.

"Her ghost, you mean?" Saul laughed. "Not that I've noticed."

"I mean Diane."

Saul's momentary blankness was fatal. Cully grinned. "Hey, man, that's twice you've done that."

"What?"

"Looked as if you didn't know what I was talking about when I mentioned Diane."

"I've learned to guard myself."

Cully's eyebrow shot up and for the first time Saul detected a quality of mischief in the actor that was subtly feminine. "I've been giving our little masquerades a lot of thought lately, Saul. You know something? I don't think there is a Diane."

Saul's angry denial only amused the actor. "Oh, don't get all steamed up, buddy. It doesn't matter, you know." Then, after a long pause: "You really want to live in this mausoleum, all by yourself?"

"There are servants."

"That's not quite the same thing. You need someone to talk to."

"I'm a painter, not a talker."

Cully strolled toward the stone balustrade that overlooked the ocean. "In fact, Saul, with me here you wouldn't even need servants. I'm an excellent cook, you know. And handyman."

Cully was no threat to him, Saul was sure of that. Cully could do nothing without implicating himself, but it was the nuisance of the thing, to have this happen just when he thought everything was nicely settled.

"I don't know, Cully. I've got

to be alone for a while anyway. Then we'll see. In the meantime I've got a little present for you."

"Severance pay, you mean?"

"We won't call it that."

"No, let's not. That wouldn't be the truth, would it?"

When it was over, Saul reflected on how simple it had been to kill Cully compared with all the psychological and logistical details involved in getting rid of Vanessa; the only real effort demanded was in burying him, he was such a heavy son of a gun, but once that chore was behind him—or beneath him—he felt infused with an abundance of energy and a freshness of vision that promised a most productive career ahead of him—until the advent of Winkelmann.

A mild-mannered bantamweight in garish plaid, the credentials he produced for Saul's inspection were just sufficient to convince Saul that the fellow was what he claimed to be—a private investigator.

"And how can I help you, Mr. Winkelmann?"

"By writing me a check for ten thousand dollars. For openers."

A quaint approach. Saul chuckled appreciatively. "You represent one of my late wife's charities, I take it?"

"I represent one of your late wife's most brilliant ideas. Or most lamentable mistakes; depending on your point of view. I take the former, since I'm the beneficiary, so to speak, of her action."

"Sorry. You'll have to be more explicit. You're contesting her will?"

"No, no. Let me explain. She hired me, Mr. Hanks, to keep an eye on you. She was suspicious, as wives frequently tend to be, bless their hearts. She suspected another woman. Hanky-panky."

The destination toward which these remarks were directed was hidden from Saul, as if, like the house that day in the fog, he knew it was there but could not even discern its outline.

"I became familiar with your routine, Mr. Hanks. Followed you into the city and to your studio every day of the week for the past two months. I must admit I found nothing to substantiate your wife's suspicions. It was impossible to convince her, however, that you were as innocent as a virgin. She insisted that you had some ulterior motive in refusing to give up your studio in the Village. Oh, my, yes, she was very firm about it. Until the day she died, in fact. That's right, sir. The very day she died. Called me up that morning

and told me she'd been all wrong about you. Said you'd promised to give up that studio and do all your work right here on the estate. She made an appointment to meet me later that morning in the Village, to pay me for my services. Then she was going to go to your studio and take you out to lunch. I met her as planned and she gave me a check. She was bubbling with excitement and happiness. She had driven off before I noticed that she'd forgotten to sign the check. I followed her to your studio but she was just going in the door when I caught up to her. I knew she wouldn't want me to see her with you around so I settled down and waited for her to come out. She never did, Mr. Hanks. You did, at your regular time, but your wife never came out of that building. I had an important dinner engagement uptown so I left, thinking maybe she'd gone out a back way. I meant to call her the next day, but then I learned that she'd presumably never left her house on Wednesday and had committed suicide on Long Island at about the time her car was parked near your studio in the Village. *Funny*, I thought. I did some nosing around, even rented your old studio and found certain stains and

other evidence that made it clear to me that you'd murdered your wife. That proof is in a safe place, Mr. Hanks. If anything should happen to me the police will have it—and you.”

Saul's only response was a negligent shrug. Winkelmann repeated his demand. Saul stroked his beard and tried to think of a way out. “Suppose I were to tell you that I was in this very house at the time my wife died in that Village studio.”

“Tut, tut, old boy, I *saw* you there.”

“Suppose you only thought you did. Suppose the man you saw was not I but a man impersonating me. And that Vanessa's death was an accident.”

“Oh, my, so many suppositions. If you could prove them I'd be out a great deal of money, wouldn't I? But I don't believe you can prove them. Can you, Mr. Hanks? Can you dig up this so-called impostor and have him corroborate your story?”

With an expression of amusement too bitter to be called a smile, Saul reached into his pocket for his checkbook.

“Oh, I suppose I could dig him up if I tried hard enough. But what's the use? I don't suppose he'd open his mouth to help me.”

One could hardly expect a sense of humor to warrant such repercussions.



Six weeks before, a young girl had been found dead in the parking lot of a Hollywood office building. She'd been strangled with a length of twine. The bare facts indicated that she was too old to be a runaway, being in her early twenties, but she could have been a missing person. Her faded jeans, white T-shirt, bra, panties and sandals gave no clues as to their origins. She had not been raped, was neither pregnant nor

on drugs, and no purse was found. Homicide had circulated her picture across the nation, and shown it to and questioned everyone in business within a five-mile area of the parking lot. *Do You Know This Girl?* pics had appeared in both newspapers and everything came up zilch.

Thirty other dead bodies, by unnatural means, had turned up in the interim and Homicide had its hands full. So the newly formed UHT (Unsolved Homicide Team) had been handed the assignment.

"You know what they call us, John?" Sgt. Mark Marcus asked his partner.

"I've been in this police department for twelve years, Mark, and I've been called a lot of things, so one more name isn't going to make or break my day," said Sgt. John Christian.

"Garbage men, that's what they're calling us."

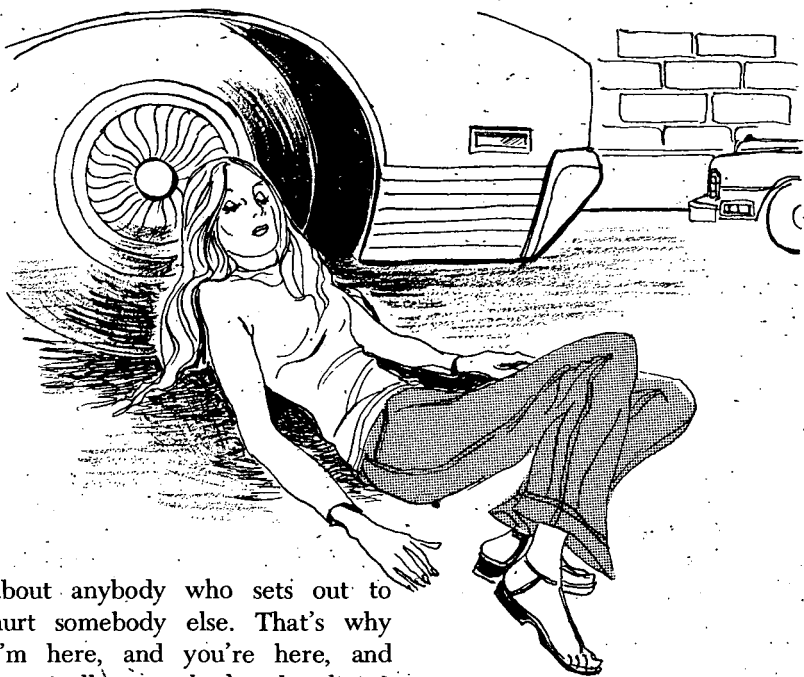
Christian smiled. "Have you any idea of what garbage men in San Francisco make? Nearly twenty thousand a year."

Mark grimaced. "Always with the jokes, always with the good temper. Doesn't *anything* make you angry?"

Christian thought a minute. "Yes, a lot of things make me angry. Mostly murderers, rapists, child molesters, drug-pushers, robbers, con men, burglars, thieves . . ." He ran out of breath. "Just

"Sure," Mark agreed. "Let's go over this autopsy report again."

They read it together. "Female Caucasian, early twenties; height, five feet four inches; weight, one hundred twenty pounds; blonde, blue eyes; no scars or abrasions aside from neck wounds; no organic disorders; no fillings or apparent dental work ever per-



about anybody who sets out to hurt somebody else. That's why I'm here, and you're here, and practically everybody else living underneath a badge. They don't hire policemen at gunpoint, you know." He grinned, finally. "End of speech, Mark. In another ten years you'll know what I'm talking about."

by
*Sonora
Morrow*

formed; not raped, pregnant or user of drugs; undigested stomach contents consisted of a large quantity of candy known as brittle and nuts, of the macadamia variety.

"Death was caused by strangulation, (see Medical below); weapon, ordinary twine sold by the millions of feet throughout the United States. Method apparently from the rear, victim held tightly until unconscious or tied until death with an ordinary double knot. Sand under toenails suggests killing possibly took place elsewhere, or victim visited a sandy place just prior to death."

"Terrific," Marcus exclaimed. He ruffled through the file. "Did Homicide do any checking along the beaches?"

"Considering that California has well over a thousand miles of beach, I doubt it," Christian replied. "Not to mention the five million sandboxes in various back yards, or the five thousand sand-and-gravel companies in our state."

Marcus sighed. "So where do we start?"

His partner was silent for a few moments.

"John?" Mark said finally.

"I was just thinking—that brittle and macadamia nuts rang a bell. About two years ago my wife and I went down to a date festival at

Indio in the desert and she got two pounds of dates and some candy—I'd swear it was macadamia brittle—terrific tasting, too, if you've got good teeth."

"So?"

"Well, I remember she mentioned she'd tried to buy more of it around town and nobody carried it."

"Are you suggesting the girl got the candy at Indio, sand in her shoes, got killed and somebody drove her all the way back from there to dump her in Hollywood? That's dumb," Mark snorted.

"Let's call the lab and make sure what kind of sand was on her—beach or desert."

"There's a *difference*?"

John grinned. "How do you know until you ask?"

It took a whole day in Indio for Christian to remember where he and his wife had bought the dates and candy. It was off-season, and took a lot of asking. Finally they met a man with some answers.

"We don't distribute anyplace. It's not exactly the kind of thing you can patent, but I did hear there was a store up in Santa Monica that was making and selling it. One of those funky places that sell orange juice with wheat germ oil and brownies of questionable ingredients, if you know

what I mean?" He was a sunburned, heavyset man with an ingratiating grin.

They thanked him and left.

"A funky place in Santa Monica," Christian sighed. "That covers a multitude of sins."

"Dear boy, remember what you've been telling me for what seems like forever? Check the records, ask the policemen in the area who allegedly know all and see all."

"A funky place here in town which sells orange juice laced with wheat germ oil, brownies of questionable ingredients and macadamia brittle?" Sgt. Gillespie of the Santa Monica Division rubbed both sides of his face with an open left hand.

"We're not looking for a good time, Sergeant," Christian said testily, "it's part of a homicide we're working on."

Gillespie smiled. "I could tell by looking at you, pal, that the description was not for joyful inquiry."

Marcus intervened. "We're a little uptight on this homicide case we're working on, and what we're looking for seems like the first decent clue we've had."

"Sure, let me ask around. In the meantime, get some coffee in the duty room—it's not bad." Gillespie

left them to question his men.

Glump's in Santa Monica didn't look like much from the outside as Christian and Marcus cruised by it. The plate-glass window needed washing, but they could see through it well enough to discern six or seven small tables with chairs, a long bar with large menus behind it, and an odd assortment of patrons sitting inside, and coming and going.

"This is way out of my line," Christian commented, "and you're going to have to go home and pick out the weirdest clothes in your closet, look strange and show the picture of the dead girl, claiming she was your fiancée from Dry Hole, Kansas, who disappeared and you think she came to California."

"Why me?" protested Marcus.

"Because I'm forty and you're twenty-nine; you can get away with it and I can't; and because I'm the superior officer of this team. *Enough?*"

"I'm convinced, I'm convinced." Mark threw up his hands.

Mark had never tasted the likes of what was for sale at Glump's, but manfully selected something he thought he could drink and took it to an empty table. He sat and he watched, and the more he

saw, the more he thought he was on the wrong planet. Everyone smiled at him and he smiled back, and finally, after an hour, he got the courage to go to the bar and show the picture of the dead girl (who didn't look dead) and ask if anyone had ever seen her. "My girl," he explained haltingly, "she ran away, always said she wanted to see the ocean and live a little."

He got a lot of heads shaking "no" until a long-bearded, long-haired man in denims took the picture in dirty hands.

"Yeah, I know this chick. Crazy about macadamia brittle and the beach, didn't dig drugs but wanted to be part of the scene, ya know?"

Marcus nodded.

"That's about it, brother." The man handed the picture back.

"But she *must* have lived around here, had friends. I mean I really have to find her."

The bearded man scratched at it. "It must have been two months ago, maybe less, we had that big hot dog luau. You remember, Lala?" He nudged the stringy-haired, hip-huggered, barefoot girl standing next to him.

She nodded vacantly.

"Yeah, she just sat close to the fire and munched on that candy, didn't eat no hot dogs or drink no beer," he added. "Didn't say

much either, might as well have been a big rock. We passed around the grass later, but she didn't even join in that. Weird, man, you know what I mean?"

Marcus nodded. "Hey," he asked, "was she with somebody? I mean, did some particular guy seem to be with her?" *Please* remember, you freak, he prayed.

The man thought awhile, scratching his beard, his cheek and finally the back of his pants. "There was a guy, a funny little person, you could tell he was straight, trying to be hip, hanging around her." The bearded man laughed. "He must have taken a course in 'body contact,' 'cause he was sure touching and hugging and trying for a score."

"What did *she* do?" Marcus asked.

"Kept brushing him off and stuffing that candy in her face."

"Did they leave together?"

Lala finally spoke in a monotone: "I seen them leave together about two in the morning, heard him say something about crashing a party in Hollywood."

Marcus felt a break coming up. "Can you describe him, Lala? *Please*, anything would mean a lot to me."

Behind the vacant eyes, a tiny wheel seemed to be trying to turn. "I think he *worked* for a liv-

ing, said something about having plenty of time to have fun before he went to work at six. He was . . . a . . . well, just a guy."

Marcus turned to the bearded man. "Can you describe him?"

"Yeah. About my height, my weight, clean-shaven and curly long red hair."

"He must have said something about where he worked or what he did for a living?"

Marcus realized he'd said the wrong words as soon as he said them. The scroungy couple turned to leave. He hurried around to confront them.

"Look, friends, she's my girl . . . I think she left home because she was pregnant . . . I . . . I have to be with her . . . She's my old lady, you understand?"

Lala and the man looked at each other. Finally the man said, "OK, we dig your scene, friend, but we never got his name. He was square, you know? When he said something about having to be at work at six, your girl kind of snorted and said 'Who cares?' And he said, 'Well, all them presses rolling ain't going to do no good if I ain't there.' Trying to make out he was something, I guess."

Marcus smiled at them. "Thank you, thank you. You have no idea what you've done for me."

The couple raised their first and

second fingers at him. "Peace," they said in unison, and Marcus left.

"Presses indicate newspapers," Christian said the next morning in the coffee room. "And we have two majors here in town and at least thirty suburban papers."

"That shouldn't take more than six months to check out," Marcus commented.

"Aha," grinned Christian, "never underestimate the power of the telephone."

Eighteen calls to newspaper personnel offices netted them three possibles; men fitting the description that Marcus had obtained.

The first one to whom they showed the picture of the dead girl, denied ever having seen her and could account for his time when the murder took place. He was married, with three children, and when he wasn't at work, he was at home.

The second one—a Mr. Flynn—gave Christian and Marcus a "gut" feeling. He glanced at the picture stolidly, shook his head and smiled at them. "Who," he asked reasonably, "can possibly tell you where he was six weeks ago?" His job was in the mail room of one of the major newspapers and twine was in abundance.

Marcus cut a piece from a roll to take to the lab.

"You're a single man, Mr. Flynn, living alone," Christian said.

"And is that a crime now, Mr. Police-Man?"

"Not at all, but we have a witness who saw you with the dead girl, before she was dead, of course, but not by much."

"So," shrugged Flynn, "I pick up a girl here and a girl there and leave them, *alive* and *untouched*, when it suits me. You can't expect me to remember them all."

"That's true," Christian agreed. "You probably haven't done anything, so stay in town and on the job, OK?"

"With a clear conscience, Officer."

Outside, Marcus almost yelled at Christian. "What's the matter with you, John? We've got the twine, he fits the description, why in hell didn't you arrest him?"

"First of all, Mark, the lab has to match that twine perfectly, second of all, what's the address of your scroungy witnesses?"

Mark thought a minute. "I see what you mean. Well, back to Glump's."

The counterman remembered Marcus and knew Lala and her hairy friend—but who knew where they lived?—and no set time for

visiting Glump's. Which meant stake-out; deadly, dull, and maddening.

Christian wished Marcus the best of luck. "We've got three other unidentified dead bodies getting colder by the minute in the morgue, partner, so let's do it, OK?"

On the second day the couple turned up. When Marcus identified himself as a police sergeant, he almost lost them. For *no* reason would they go down to headquarters and fink on a fellow human being, but he did get them to agree to look at the suspect in Glump's the following evening. He was smart enough not to insist on knowing their names or address. They detested murderers, but not enough to sacrifice their own privacy.

The lab had confirmed that the twine was identical to that which had strangled the unidentified girl, and Flynn had agreed to accompany Christian and Marcus to the store in Santa Monica. "A free dinner is a free dinner," was his comment.

Lala and her man were there, nodded at the sight of Flynn and left.

"We're going to read you your rights, Mr. Flynn," Christian said while the young man sipped at

the carrot malt special. "And then we're booking you for murder."

"You're crazy," Flynn replied.

"I don't think so," Marcus answered. "Our lab has matched the twine, we have eyewitnesses and your car has been checked out—sand, macadamia brittle pieces and strands of the girl's hair have been found in it."

"No, no, NO!" he screamed. "Dumb, stupid little broad from no-place North Dakota, she should have appreciated that a big city man was interested in her. I wanted to love her, to take care of her, and all she did was laugh at me and eat that stupid candy. I took the twine and I put it around her neck and I stopped that laughing, you hear? Nobody laughs at me. *Nobody!*"

"Where did you come up with that thing about his car, Mark?" Christian asked. "I ran him through DMV and got nothing."

"Well," Marcus said, smiling, "you're just in the wrong age group. You buy a car, register it, insure it and are an all-around good citizen, right?"

Christian nodded in agreement.

"Not so, with many of us in our twenties. We get a heap and just drive it. Who needs registration and insurance?"

"But—"

"But nothing. He didn't take her to Santa Monica by bus, or even if he did, no buses run at two in the morning, especially to Hollywood. Taxi? That's a lot of bread, and we'd have gotten a response to our newspaper pictures of the girl. Taxi drivers are pretty sharp. Ergo, he had a car."

The newspapers carried a picture of Flynn, handcuffed and smiling, and a small story of his arrest in connection with the murder of an unidentified girl. Queries to North Dakota law enforcement officials finally produced the information that she had once lived in an orphanage, worked in a Grand Forks drugstore and left to go to California. Her name was Marilyn Jones. The newspapers put that late information close to the back page of the front section.

Christian and Marcus had already started on their next case.



Imagination may prove a most subtle weapon in solving a complex problem.

With a Word

by
Wise Toole

We were talking about murder. This would have seemed strange to anyone who overheard us, as my uncle is not a person you associate with violence. Rather, his appearance is that of serenity and of a man untouched by the harsher realities of living, much as if he had created his own small world and resided there happily without regard for whatever took place outside it.

"You are too quick to judge, Tom. Murder is not always a clear thing—even to those who commit it," Uncle Jim continued, "and until we have a proven method of reading men's hearts and minds, it never will be." He paused and sipped his brandy. "And don't forget, at some point in time, for

various reasons, most all of us kill. It's our nature."

There was no passion in the words, but a strength of conviction that contrasted sharply with his thin, humorless lips, small chin, and pale skin. The statement seemed totally incongruous coming from this balding little man in gold-rimmed glasses, who habitually wears dark suits, white shirts and solid-color ties.

"That's a *very* broad statement, Uncle Jim." I smiled.

"But a true one," he persisted in the precise, pedantic manner of a schoolmaster. In fact, as a boy, I always thought of him that way: a

rather imperious schoolmaster. Despite this—and I never fully understood it at the time—I liked being with him. Now that I am older, I realize it is his large friendly eyes that save him from projecting the repelling image so common to men of his type; and that it is his rich warm voice that makes women see a six-foot Adonis.

When you couple these characteristics with a quick, incisive mind, his total image is that of a solid, weathered bank building that houses an organization you can trust. I suppose this is why he is considered the best criminal lawyer in the state.

I, on the other hand, am young and raw; just starting to become aware of all the varying shades of gray between my youthful beliefs in total blacks and whites. I am not as liberal as most of my contemporaries, but I do dress with the times; have a new law degree, and am totally involved with deciding what part of the world I will grab onto for my ride through life. That is why—along with the fact he is my uncle—I was spending the evening with this well-known man, eating a superb dinner in an exclusive club, and enjoyably discussing criminal law and my future employment.

"Oh, come on, Uncle Jim," I re-

plied. "It's a tactical error to overstate your case. You know that you and I can't be included in such a sweeping generalization, and that weakens your point."

"But we *can*," he insisted. "We really *can*." He paused as if searching for words, but I knew it was for dramatic effect. "I'm old and know what I am. You're young, but you will age and know what you are soon enough." He shifted his brandy glass on the table with studied precision and continued, "My father and your grandfather used to say, 'There are better ways to kill a cat than hitting it with a shovel.' I will admit this is a direct and rather crude philosophy, but over the years I have found it provides very realistic guidance in solving some disturbing problems."

He motioned for the waiter to bring more brandy. As we were being served, his words worked in my mind. When the waiter left, I blurted incredulously, "Are you telling me that *you* have killed someone—committed murder?"

My uncle gave me one of his rare smiles and held a finger to his lips in a gesture of quiet. "You see? A rash, hasty and ill-conceived question. No imagination behind it whatsoever. My answer to it is obviously *no*! However, phrased differently, I might be

hard pressed to give you the same answer. Handled properly, Tom, imagination provides you an extremely subtle source of power. As your employer, I believe it would be advantageous to us both for you to learn more about using it."

He reached into his coat pocket and took out a money clip, removed a five-dollar bill and placed it in front of me. "Considering what I am going to tell you, I will be more comfortable talking to a lawyer. That five dollars is your retainer." I picked up the bill and put it in my pocket, as he continued, "And, with our positions thus established, let's talk about things other than 'shovels.'"

My uncle leaned back in his chair, his eyes focused directly on mine and said, "I was placed in this particular situation by the request of a friend, who called and asked me to help a business acquaintance of his. He said the man, Peter Dawes, had been arrested for murder. My friend characterized Dawes as a brilliant, somewhat eccentric architect who was also considered an authority on Oriental religions. He admitted that Dawes was a bit odd—seemingly absentminded or preoccupied much of the time—but that he was a distinct business asset and he felt that Dawes' reli-

gious beliefs precluded him from committing acts of violence.

"I agreed to talk with Dawes and that afternoon I went to the city jail. The man I met there was tall and heavy with muscle going to fat. His pale-green eyes seemed empty and remote from what I took to be shock or grief. His manner was cautious and withdrawn and he appeared genuinely distressed and confused by the charge made against him—the murder of a girl named Jean Marston. 'I loved her. They don't seem to understand that,' he kept repeating as he rubbed the fat fingers on one hand nervously with the other. I could see from the police report why 'they' didn't understand.

"It seems that in response to an anonymous telephone call, the police had investigated a report of loud crying about two in the morning, somewhere on the third floor of an old apartment building. By the simple process of listening, they located the apartment, entered and found Dawes. He was the person crying. More important, however, he was crying beside a girl's broken body, and he was covered with her blood. She had been savagely beaten to death with a hammer, which he was holding when the police found him.



"His story was simple and direct. He denied any knowledge of the murder and claimed to have returned to the city from a business trip late the night she was killed. They were good friends and he had gone directly to her apartment from the airport. When she did not answer his knock, he tried the door, found it unlocked, went in, and discovered her body. He said he remembered very little after that, but apparently had gone into shock, picked her up, held her in his arms and began crying. He did not recall picking up the hammer and he had no idea who could have killed her.

"It was strange, but I did not like Dawes from the minute I laid eyes on him. It was a visceral thing. He reminded me of a large, plump, pale maggot and just watching him move made me queasy. However, I took the case because my friend asked me to, and his faith in Dawes conditioned me to believe that the man was a dreamer who had been trapped by realities he did not understand.

"This thin salve to my distaste for Dawes was short-lived for, after two sessions with him, trying in every way possible to put some kind of foundation under his story, I began to sense that he probably *had* killed Miss Marston. Still,

Dawes stuck doggedly to his naive position, never changing one word of his original explanation.

"I worried over the case, even going to the extent of requesting a psychiatric examination for the man in hopes this would reveal something that would help me in preparing his defense. The examining doctor reported that Dawes was guarded in discussing the murder, but exhibited genuine grief over Miss Marston's death. There were overtones of a deep-seated affection for her that Dawes vaguely indicated would be fulfilled at a later time and place, in a manner not clear. The doctor felt it was related in some way to his mystical religious beliefs. There were also signs of depression and guilt conflicts that could develop into suicidal tendencies if allowed to intensify. However, for the moment, Dawes was legally sane. He was well-oriented, but experiencing difficulty sleeping. He associated freely with his environment and clearly understood his position. These factors were all interesting, but produced nothing I could use.

"The worst part of the situation for me personally was that the more I saw of Dawes, the more I disliked him. I had even begun to detest being in the same room with him. Still, I am a lawyer and

I chose the only course open to me. I kept him off the stand and based our defense on the blatant circumstances of the case. I took what I call a 'TV' stance: that things were so bad, they couldn't possibly be true. I did not attempt to refute any of the police testimony, only sprinkle it with doubt as it related to Dawes. I cast him in the role of a man trapped by circumstances, standing trial for the deed of a vicious, nameless killer. I was at my persuasive best. I conjured up for the jury terrible visions of the many unknown rapists and killers stalking the streets of our city; I reminded them constantly of the jungle our town had become; I threatened them with the everlasting personal horror of convicting an innocent man for the death of his loved one, while the true killer roamed free and unfettered in his search for future victims. In every possible crack, and they were few, I pounded the wedges of 'reasonable doubt.' Oh, my boy, it was a masterful performance, even if I say so myself. And; it was effective. The jury returned with a verdict of *not* guilty. I was probably less pleased with the decision than the police.

"The next morning Dawes came to my office to settle his account. It took an effort, but I was civil to him. We had coffee and he

gave me a check for my fee. As he was leaving, I suddenly asked the question that had bothered me all during the trial, 'Why did you kill her?'

"'The jury says I didn't,' he replied slyly.

"'Oh, come now. That part's over and done with, but I've known from the beginning you did it,' I bluffed. 'Do you mind telling me why? Just to satisfy my personal curiosity.'

"'No, not at all,' he said coldly, returning to his chair and sitting down. 'In fact, I would like to. I need to tell someone.' His voice was flat and even, with all emotion suppressed by the intensity of his words. 'Actually, *I* didn't kill her. I was merely the arm of fate. Her death had been decreed in lives before this because she was *evil*. That's why I had to kill her. Even now—here in this very office—I can see her laughing . . . tossing her black hair . . . her eyes bright and slanted, beautiful; but I could never see her mind through them. Her skin was soft and smooth, like velvet in places . . . and her body . . . *sinful*! It bred desire . . . she was all lights and shadows . . . she drove me wild . . . she made me forget my *higher* purpose in life . . .' His voice fell and then rose sharply, 'I never understood her mind . . . it

was a mystery to me. That was another reason I had to kill her. She loved people! All kinds of people. And they loved her back. This was wrong! I should have been all she needed, but she wouldn't listen . . . she wouldn't understand her place in this existence . . .

"Everyone thought she was so perfect. But, of course, they hadn't experienced her rejection. They saw things that weren't there. I tried to explain to her how perfect was my love . . . that there was no room for others . . . and she rejected me . . . can you imagine? She would talk about her *freedom* and *individuality* and my *jealousy*; and she turned her back on me. She told me to leave her alone . . . that I was too possessive . . . that she would find *love* somewhere else. As if I could stand for another man to touch her.' He slammed his fists on my desk, and I was disgusted, watching the faint traces of saliva at the corners of his mouth.

"She refused to talk to me anymore," he continued. "She avoided me, until finally I grew tired of her silly games. If only she had listened . . . if only she had understood . . . perhaps we could have changed things. But she was evil and ungodly and when I saw her one night with

another man, I knew there was only one thing I could do. I really had no choice. I did try one more time to explain this to her. It was that night, but she wouldn't listen. She tried to run from me. So I did what I had to do. I got a hammer from her kitchen and I killed her.'

"Then," my uncle stated quietly, "Dawes said a truly disturbing thing. As he got up from his chair and calmly wiped the corners of his mouth with a dirty handkerchief, he smiled and said hoarsely, 'I thank you for setting me free. There are other evil people who need my help.'

"It was a terrible thing to contemplate," my uncle continued. "Not only had my skills freed a madman but, from what I could see and from what he said, he would kill again.

"At that moment, an animal hatred for Dawes I cannot even describe gripped me. All I can remember of it was the blackness and the fury; the cold, driving need to see him dead." My uncle paused, rubbed his right forefinger around the edge of his brandy glass, breathed deeply and said quietly, "I honestly do not know if the idea of how to accomplish this desire came from my disgust, or my hate, or just the simple need for personal retribution, but whatever the reason, it came

quickly and it came clear and complete. There was no doubt in my mind what to do or how to do it.

"I sat back in my chair, waved my hand in humility, smiled, and said, 'I accept your thanks gratefully, Mr. Dawes. And, I am sure, Miss Marston's also. You obviously did her a great favor and I am certain she is much happier where she is.'

"He looked at me quizzically and asked sharply, 'What do you mean by that?'

"Why, from what you told me, it was exactly what she wanted,' I replied sincerely. 'Now she is free to associate with as many men as she so chooses.'

"His eyes flared as he said tightly, 'I do not understand why you would say such a thing.'

"I held up the palms of my hands in an open, friendly gesture and replied, 'Life after death, you know. You do believe in life after death, don't you?'

"He nodded enthusiastically and excitedly. 'Yes! Yes, I do! There is definitely another level of con-

sciousness above and beyond the—'

"Well, you see,' I interrupted patiently, 'she is now *there*. In effect, you gave her what she wanted—freedom to know many different people, particularly men, on her terms and not yours. You are no longer in a position to do anything about it. Are you?'

"Yes,' he said slowly, 'I begin to see what you mean . . . I must think about it.' Lost in thought, he walked to the door.

"I watched the door close behind him and with relief I summoned my secretary. I handed her his check and said, 'Go to the bank and cash this right away.'

"I was correct, of course. The doctor had judged his state of mind perfectly. He killed himself that night."

I set my brandy glass on the table and exclaimed, "He went looking for her!"

"Yes," my uncle nodded, "he went looking for her." Then he stood up, and as he was leaving he said, "You see what I mean? Imagination can be a much better weapon than a shovel."

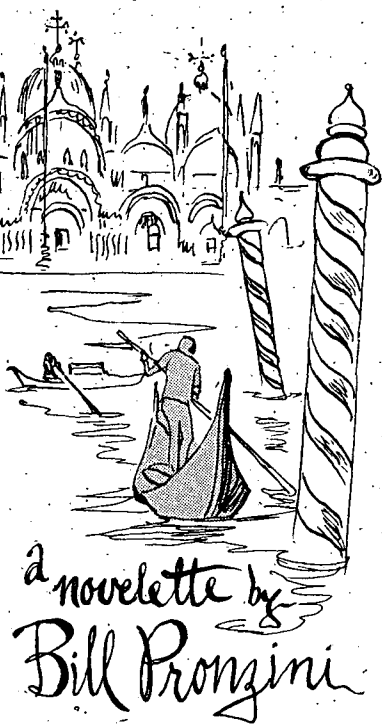


No one would deny, of course, that prolonged inactivity does, at times, precipitate one into peremptory action.

Free-Lance Operation

Carmody reached St. Mark's Square, the commercial, artistic, and tourist hub of Venice, just past five of a warm Friday afternoon in September, and took a table at one of the open-air cafes on the Piazzeta. He ordered a cup of cappuccino and sat looking out on the wide basin into which the city's two major canals, the Grand and the Giudecca, emptied. The falling sun streaked the water in silver, reflected off the hulls of gondolas, water taxis, passenger ferries, and small commercial craft which dotted its surface.

Fifteen minutes had passed when Della Robbia came out of the swarm of tourists and pigeons



a novelette by
Bill Pronzini

flocking the square and sat down across from him.

Carmody said, "Well?"

"The boat has been arranged," Della Robbia answered. He was young and dark and relaxed, and he wore a light gray suit, bench-made shoes, a pair of very dark

glasses. He spoke careful, British-accented English.

"Where do I meet it?"

"The Rio di Fontego, at the foot of Via Giordano."

"Ten o'clock?"

"Just as you requested."

"What did you tell the driver?"

"Nothing that he did not need to know."

"Does he speak English?"

"Enough to understand simple directions."

"Can he be trusted?"

"Yes."

"All right," Carmody said. "You'll get your commission when I get paid. Figure a week."

"Bene," Della Robbia said, smiling, and got to his feet. "Good luck, Signor Carmody."

When Della Robbia had disappeared into a crowd of sight-seers gathered before the Ducal Palace, Carmody lighted one of the short, thin, black cigars he liked. He smoked it down slowly, and then stood and gave several lire notes to a passing waiter. Lean, almost predatory, Carmody moved with a smooth, liquid grace. He had leather-tan features, flat green eyes, and shaggy gray-ing-black hair; a sardonic mouth made him look faintly Satanic. As he started away, a young micro-skirted Italian girl sitting at one of the tables smiled invitingly at

him. Carmody ignored her; when he was working, he gave no thought at all to playing.

He walked east to a renovated, 16th century palace which now served as one of the more fashionable hotels along the Grand Canal. In his room there, he spread a map of Venice open on the double bed and located the Rio di Fontego, one of the city's 400 canals, and Via Giordano. He traced a water route from there to the Rio San Spirito, where Valconazzi had his hideaway, and saw that the distance was no more than half a mile. If the driver Della Robbia had recruited knew his business, it should take them no longer than thirty minutes to traverse the maze of small *riis* which dotted the area. Figure fifteen minutes to get Valconazzi and his woman into the boat, and another hour or so to get into and out of the Venice Lagoon; the boat which would take them to Trieste would be at the rendezvous point in the Adriatic gulf at exactly midnight. It all seemed to dovetail nicely.

Carmody refolded the map, put it away, and made himself a drink from the array of bottles on a silver cart provided by the management. Then he went to the telephone, gave the switchboard a number.

A moment later Valconazzi's thick, atonal voice said guardedly, "Yes? What is it?"

"Carmody. We're set."

There was an audible expulsion of breath. "When do we leave?"

"Tonight. Be ready at ten-thirty."

"I have been ready for the past three days," Valconazzi said. "A man cannot be any more ready than I am."

"Ten-thirty," Carmody said again, and rang off.

He went to the bed with his drink and lay down and looked at the high Renaissance ceiling, thinking about Valconazzi and the job that had brought him to Venice four days previously. Valconazzi was, or had been, a smuggler who dealt in the lucrative commodity of cigarettes. The Italian government has a monopoly on the manufacture and sale of all tobacco products, and imposes a high duty on the import of American and English brands. Since most Italians prefer the imported to the raw homemade variety, and the demand grows greater every year, tons of contraband cigarettes are smuggled annually into the country. Valconazzi's operation was one of the largest in the northern provinces. He'd had cigarettes coming into Venice from Trieste, across the gulf, and down

from Switzerland—and a fleet of trucks and men to distribute them throughout Italy. Then the Guardia di Finanza, the agents of the ministry which runs the monopoly for the government, had descended with a series of recent raids that left Valconazzi's operation hurting and vulnerable.

One of the other dealers, a long-time rival of Valconazzi's named Lambresca, had seen his chance to take over and had made two unsuccessful elimination attempts. With the Guardia di Finanza and the Venice *carabinieri* breathing on his neck on one side, and Lambresca and his group closing in on the other, Valconazzi had been forced to abandon his palatial house on Lido Island, along with most of his possessions, and to go into hiding. Rita, his mistress of several years, had gone with him.

Ordinarily he would have been able to get out of Italy on his own, especially in view of the fact that he had amassed a considerable fortune in smuggling profits which he was able to take with him; but the heat was particularly heavy from both legal and illegal sources, and he had been afraid to trust former friends and allies and afraid to chance any escape routes known to him. That was why he had thought to bring in Carmody.

Carmody was a free-lance body-guard, a man with connections that reached into every country in the free world—and some of those behind the Iron Curtain. He had a reputation for results, and for complete trustworthiness that was unequalled by any individual or organization operating in or out of Europe. As a result of that reputation, the always desperate, always well-heeled men and women with whom he dealt were more than willing to pay the somewhat exorbitant fees he charged for his services.

Having heard of Carmody, Valconazzi knew that in order to set up a meeting with him he would have to go through one of Carmody's contacts. The long-time contact for Carmody in the Venice area was a man named Piombo—but Piombo had made the mistake a month previously of getting himself shot by the *carabinieri* during an abortive art theft. Valconazzi had, instead, got in touch with Gino Della Robbia, one of Piombo's cohorts and heir-apparent to his contact position.

It had been two months since Carmody had last worked, and prolonged inactivity always made him restless, so he was receptive to the job when Della Robbia contacted him, and had flown directly to Venice. Valconazzi had called

him at his hotel to tell him where the hideaway was—he had trusted no one, not even Della Robbia, with its location—and Carmody had taken a careful, roundabout route to San Spirito. After talking to Valconazzi, and after the receipt of five thousand faith money, he had then gone to work setting up an escape network.

When the three of them arrived in Trieste tonight, there would be a plane to take them first to Spain and then to the island of Sardinia. Undetectably manufactured passports and other necessary papers would be waiting at the port of Cagliari. Once delivered safely there, Valconazzi was on his own; and Carmody would return to his home base on the Mediterranean island of Majorca five figures richer . . .

Carmody finished his drink, smoked another of the thin, black cigars, and then changed into dark trousers, a dark shirt, and a long leather jacket. He packed his single bag, went downstairs, and checked out of the hotel, leaving the bag in the care of the desk clerk. Then he walked into one of the narrow, carless interior streets, found a restaurant, and ate a leisurely dinner.

At nine o'clock he returned to the hotel, picked up his bag, and went into the lobby rest room. In

one of the stalls, he removed the Beretta and the belt half-holster from the bag's false bottom and strapped the rig on under his jacket, where he could get at it easily with his right hand if the need arose.

He left the hotel again and walked to one of the route stops for the passenger ferries, the Venice equivalent of municipal buses. He rode one up the Grand Canal, which divides the city in half, and disembarked at the stop near the ornately arched Rialto Bridge. After crossing the bridge, he checked the city map he had brought with him and then found his way easily to Via Giordano.

At the foot of the street was a set of stairs leading down into the black, sharply-odored waters of the Rio di Fontego. He waited there in the shadows, watching occasional black gondolas glide past, listening to the faint, pulsing sounds of water traffic on the Grand Canal.

It was one minute past ten when he heard the muffled throb of a boat engine. A moment later the launch—small and radio-equipped, like the water taxis—came along the *rio* and drifted over to the cement seawall. The man standing behind the wheel starboard was short and bearded, wearing a beret and a black tur-

tleneck. He called softly, "Signor?"

Carmody looked back along Via Giordano, saw nothing, and came out of the shadows. Descending the three steps cut into the cement wall, he boarded the launch and stowed his bag under the front seat. The driver studied him for a moment, then turned to the canal, waiting for instructions.

Carmody said, "Rio San Spirito. Number fifty-two. Can you find it?"

"San Spirito? Yes, I know it."

"Let's go, then."

The darkness was thick, and blanketing in the narrow canals through which they maneuvered, and the small red-and-green running lights on the launch were often the only illumination. Carmody didn't expect company, but he watched astern just to make sure and saw nothing except an occasional wraithlike gondola gliding one way or another, in and out of the maze of waterways. Most of the ancient, decaying buildings along the *riis* were dark; even those which were occupied had shutters drawn across their oblong windows, allowing little light to escape. The silence, broken only by the gentle throb of the launch's inboard engine, was almost oppressive. So was the odor of garbage and salt water on

the pleasantly cool, late-summer air.

The bearded driver, silent and competent, took the launch through the twisting network of canals at what seemed to Carmody a snail's pace, but it was not even ten-thirty when he brought them into the black mouth of another canal and said, "San Spirito, Signor."

"Fine," Carmody said. He looked for familiar landmarks, found one. "It should be the first building on the near side of that bridge ahead."

The driver nodded, cutting power, and eased the launch in close to the unbroken line of brick-and-cement walls on the right. They neared the small, arched bridge which served as a span between two narrow streets, and Carmody pointed out the slender concrete platform beyond number fifty-two. When the launch had edged up to it, he jumped onto the platform.

"Wait here," he said to the driver. "And keep the engine running."

The canal door to the building which was Valconazzi's hideaway was at the near end of the platform, set into the right-angled corner between the *rio* and a high, chinked-brick garden wall. Carmody went to the door and used a corroded brass knocker; it made a hollow sound in the empty black

stillness, but he knocked only once.

Valconazzi's voice said immediately, "Si?" He had been standing on the other side of the door, waiting.

"Carmody. Open it up."

There was the sound of a bolt being shot free, and then a key turned in the old-fashioned latch. The door edged inward. Carmody went inside, and Valconazzi was three feet away, with a small, blued-steel revolver in his hand. Behind him, through an archway, the lush brunette Rita stood poised as if for flight.

Carmody said, "Put the iron away," and moved down the short hallway, past Valconazzi and into the dimly lighted room where the girl was. His nostrils contracted, as they had on his previous visit, at the lingering odor of damp decay commingled with the fish-and-garbage reek penetrating from the canal outside. Three leather suitcases were on the floor next to a worn sofa; one of them—the largest—Carmody knew to contain the run-out money from which he would be paid.

Rita said, "We are leaving now?" in husky, broken English, and her eyes were huge and black in the dark cast of her face. She was tall and broad and enormous-breasted, like a Rubens' nude, and if you liked your women that

way, as Valconazzi obviously did, she was provocatively appealing; Carmody preferred small, petite women, and to him Rita seemed much too much of a good thing. At the moment she was nervous and either excited or afraid—the way she had seemed to Carmody before. She could not seem to keep her hands still.

"We're leaving now," he told her. "Let's get the bags out to the boat."

Valconazzi came into the room. Thick-necked and bearish, with a luxuriant black military moustache, he looked more like an Italian Army colonel than a criminal on the run. "It seemed as if you would never get here tonight," he said. "This old house groans like an ancient, and I would jump at every sound."

Carmody said nothing, looking impatient, and Valconazzi went immediately to the bags and picked up two of them. Rita took the third, so that Carmody could keep his hands free. He preceded them to the door, opened it, and peered out; the launch sat silently against the concrete platform, the bearded driver standing over the wheel and looking back at the door. Carmody stepped out, motioning Valconazzi and the girl along, and while the suitcases were being handed into the

launch and set down astern, he stood slightly apart from the others and looked both ways along the canal.

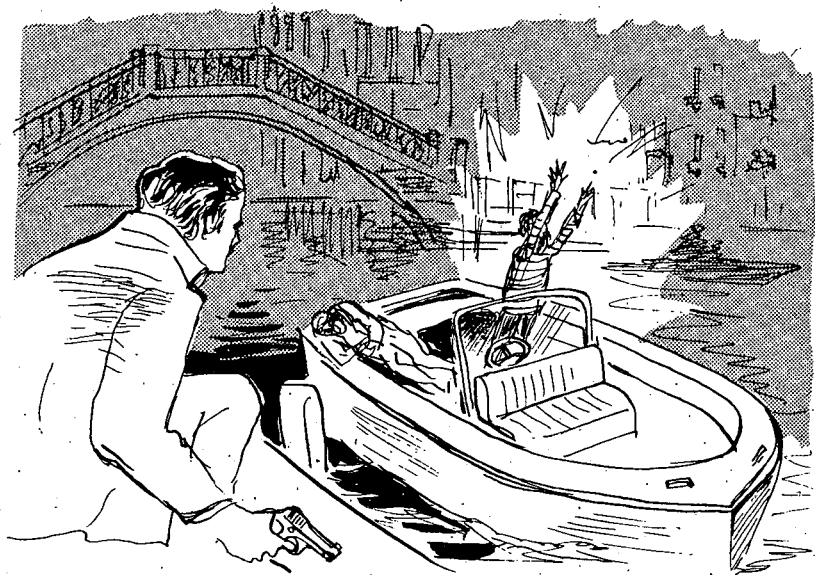
Rita said suddenly in Italian, "My cosmetic case. I left it inside." She stepped away hurriedly, starting back toward the still-open door to the building. Her voice had seemed high and nervously shrill in the silence.

"Wait, Rita . . ." Valconazzi began, but she had her back to him, almost to the door now.

In that moment Carmody sensed, rather than saw, the first movement in the shadows beyond the bridge.

The muscles in his stomach constricted and he swept the jacket back and slid the Beretta out of its holster. The shadows seemed to separate, like an amoeba reproducing, and a formless shape edged away from the seawall, coming under the bridge. There was the faint pulsation of a boat engine.

Menace crackled like electricity on the cool night air, and Carmody shouted, "Valconazzi! Get down!" He dropped to one knee, sighting at the moving outline of the boat as it drew nearer, and fired twice. He heard bullets slap wood somewhere on the craft, and then a man-shape reared up at the wheel and the night seemed to ex-



plode in bright flashes, in chattering sound.

Valconazzi, startled by Carmody's sudden warning, had failed to react immediately. Now he screamed and wrapped both hands across his stomach, turned in a half-circle, and fell heavily into the launch's stern. In the same instant the bearded driver jerked straight up, hands outstretched as if imploring; then he toppled sideways out of sight. Bullets sprayed the garden wall at the rear of the platform, whined off the concrete, thudded into the wooden hull of the launch.

Carmody thought: *Thompson gun*—and threw himself forward into the canal.

The water was chill and black, and he could taste the pollution of it, the harshness of oil and fish and garbage. He fought to keep from gagging and kicked straight down, at an angle across the narrow width of the *rio*. The Beretta was still in his hand, and he shoved it inside the waistband of his slacks before struggling out of the binding leather jacket. Swimming blind, groping ahead of him for the wall on the far side, he could feel pressure mounting rapidly in his lungs. Finally, his fingers came in contact with the rough surface, and he crawled upward along it and poked his head out of the water, dragging air through his mouth, looking back.

The ambush boat had drawn alongside the launch, and the dark form of the machine gunner was frantically transferring Valconazzi's suitcases into his own craft with one hand, still holding the Thompson gun with the other. A long way off, somebody was shouting. There was intermittent light along the canal now, but not enough for Carmody to determine if the boat held more than one man.

The machine gunner pulled the last suitcase aboard. Turning, he saw Carmody along the far wall, and the automatic weapon came up to his shoulder and began to chatter yellowly again. Chips of plaster and stone flew outward as the slugs scarred the wall, but Carmody was already beneath the canal's surface again, diving deeply and kicking straight across.

Above him, then, he heard the boat's engine grow abruptly loud, and he knew that the gunner was not wasting any more time, not with the area soon to be swarming with police craft. When he found the seawall and crawled up along it as he had done on the other side, the ambush boat was a dark blob just swinging out of San Spirito into another canal.

There were more lights on in nearby buildings, people with their heads pushed curiously be-

tween partially-opened shutters. Carmody swam to the launch, caught the port gunwale, and hauled himself into the craft. Valconazzi had been stitched across the abdomen with half a dozen bullets; the driver had been shot twice in the throat. The deck of the launch was slick with spilled blood.

Impotent rage made Carmody's temples throb wildly, and his green eyes glowed like a cat's in the darkness. He looked under the front seat and saw that his own suitcase was still there. He pushed it onto the platform, climbed up after it, and ran with it to the door of number fifty-two. Inside, he went through the three downstairs rooms and two upstairs; the house was empty.

The woman, Rita, was gone.

Lips pulled back wolfishly from his teeth, Carmody went out a side door into a garden grown wild with lavender wisteria and white oleander. The windows of an adjacent building looked down into it, and a fat man in an undershirt stood framed in one, shouting angrily. Several large chestnut trees grew in the garden's center, and Carmody stayed in their shadow until he found a gate opening onto one of the narrow, twisting *calli* which mazed the area in much the same manner as

the canals. He yanked it wide.

As he came running through the gate, a tall youth materialized from the darkness in front of him, waving his arms. Carmody lowered his shoulder and barreled into the youth and sent him sprawling against the garden wall. A woman's voice began cursing querulously in Italian some distance away. Carmody ran to the first corner, turned it, into another street, ran another block, rounded another corner and came out in a *campiello* with a small stone statue in its center.

He ducked around the statue and went into a slender black alley on the opposite side of the square. With his back against the cold stone wall, he watched the *campiello*. No one came into it, but he stayed where he was for several minutes, catching his breath, shivering inside his wet clothing. Then he moved deeper into the blackness, set his bag down, and worked the catches to open it.

Rita, he was thinking, *it had to have been Rita*. In addition to himself, the woman and Valconazzi were the only ones who knew about the San Spirito hideaway; and she had gone back to the house, out of the way, immediately before the shooting started. The way it figured, she had used

the telephone in the house, when Valconazzi was in another of the rooms, and had tipped Lambresca—the smuggling rival who wanted Valconazzi's blood. Lambresca had told her how it would be done, about the ambush, and then he had sent his machine gunner to do the job. Her motivation was obvious enough: Valconazzi's run-out money—and maybe some personal reason, as well, that Carmody could not know about. In any case, the money had to have been a primary consideration; the gunner had taken the time to fish the three suitcases out of the launch before getting the hell away from San Spirito.

Why had Rita done it that way? Why not just put a knife in Valconazzi at the house and simply walk out with the money? Or tip Lambresca off days sooner; they had been in the house for two weeks. Well, there were several possible explanations: she wasn't capable of committing murder herself; it had taken her the full two weeks to work up enough courage for the double cross; Valconazzi had the money hidden in a place only he knew about. Whatever the reason, Rita was the Judas, all right . . .

While all of this was going through his mind, Carmody changed clothes in the darkness,

putting on the jacket and shirt and slacks he had worn earlier in the day. The sodden things went into the suitcase, rolled into a towel. Then he left the alley and walked around until he found a neighborhood bar.

Locking himself in the rest room, he broke down the Beretta and cleaned and oiled it with materials from the false bottom of his bag. When he was satisfied that it was in working order, he moved out into the bar proper and drank two cognacs to get the taste of the canal water out of his mouth.

There was a telephone on a rear wall. Carmody dialed Della Robbia's number, and the receiver was lifted on the sixth ring. He said, "Carmody. We had trouble. The whole thing's blown."

Silence; then Della Robbia said, "What happened?"

"We were ambushed. Valconazzi is dead. So's your launch driver. They were laying for us in a boat—one man with a machine gun that I'm sure about, maybe a back-up. It was too dark to see much."

Della Robbia released a soft breath. "What about you?" he asked. "You are all right, Signor?"

"Rum dandy," Carmody said. He was holding the phone receiver as if it were the machine gunner's neck. "Listen, it figures

Valconazzi's woman is mixed up in the hit. She ducked off just before we were ambushed."

"But why would she—"

Carmody said, "I don't have all the answers yet, that's what I need you for. What do you know about this Rita?"

"Very little, Signor."

"Was she ever involved in any way with a guy called Lambresca?"

"Valconazzi's rival? No, Signor, not that I am aware. Do you believe Lambresca helped arrange the ambush? That it was he and the woman?"

"That's right. Where do I find him, Della Robbia?"

"He has a wholesale vegetable dealership on Campo Oroglia, with living quarters above it. But, Signor—"

"Get to work on the woman," Carmody said. "Dig me up a lead, use your connections. If I can't get anything out of Lambresca, I've got to have a starting point, some kind of direction. She's not going to get out of Venice—no way, you hear? Valconazzi is the first customer I ever lost, and I don't like it and I won't stand for it. I can't run my business letting somebody set up a customer and get away with it. Now get busy, and no nonsense."

"Just as you say," Della Robbia

agreed hurriedly. "Where are you? Where can I—"

"I'll be in touch," Carmody said, and slapped the handset into its cradle.

There was nobody home.

Carmody stepped out from under the doorway arch and looked up once again at the sign running across the top of the closed front of the warehouse. It said *A. Lambresca* in thick black lettering, and below that *Campo Oroglia 24*. He let his gaze drift higher, to the barren eyes of the windows strung along the second-floor front. No sign of life. He had been there for five minutes, ringing bells and making noises like a drunk, his fingers restless on the butt of the Beretta in his jacket pocket. There had been no response of any kind, and it seemed obvious now that Lambresca was somewhere else on this night.

Out taking care of Rita, Carmody thought. Paying her off—or maybe double-crossing her the way she double-crossed Valconazzi; so he can keep the money for himself.

He looked at his watch; almost one-thirty. The night was deep and silent, and there was a hollow, lonely echo to his steps as he crossed the square to enter the same street by which he had ar-

rived. The rage inside him was thinly contained, screaming for an outlet.

He located a small hotel, gave the clerk a thousand-lire note for the use of the telephone. Della Robbia answered almost immediately. Carmody said, "Well?"

"I have learned something," Della Robbia said, "but perhaps it means little or nothing."

"I'll decide that. What is it?"

"The woman has an uncle; a man named Salviati, who owns a *sqhero*—a boatyard for the repair and construction of gondolas. The uncle is said to have smuggled contraband in the past, and so has several boats of high speed at his disposal. It is possible the woman has gone there, either because she wishes to leave the city or because she wishes to hide."

Carmody gave it some thought. It was possible, all right. Assuming it was the money that had prompted Rita to sell out Valconazzi, she might have gotten her payoff and made straight for her uncle's, for one of the two reasons Della Robbia had just suggested. She would need someone she could trust, and Lambresca was not necessarily that someone. Or she could have gone there immediately after leaving San Spirito, be waiting there now for Lambresca to bring the money.

He asked, "Where is this place, this *squero*?"

"On the Rio degli Zecchini. A water taxi can take you nearby, if you can find one at this hour of night."

"I can find one," Carmody said.

From where he stood in the shadows across the Rio degli Zecchini, Carmody could see the vague black shapes and skeletons of gondolas in the *squero's* low-fenced rear yard. Set back fifty feet from the waterway was a two-story, wood-and-brick building that looked as if it had been constructed in the time of the doges. It was completely dark. The area itself was relatively deserted, containing mostly warehouses. No light showed anywhere in the vicinity, save for a distant street lamp beyond a bridge spanning the canal twenty yards to the left of Carmody's vantage point.

He put his suitcase into a shadowed wall niche, took the Beretta out of his jacket pocket—the sodden holster was in the bag—and held it cupped low against his right leg as he walked slowly to the bridge. On the opposite seawall, he stood listening for a moment. A ship's horn bayed mournfully out on the Lagoon, but the interruption was only momentary

in the dank, late-night stillness.

The rear entrance to the *squero* was a wooden gate set into a three-quarter frame of two-by-fours; the other quarter was the brick wall of the adjacent building. On the canal side, and on top, the beams sprouted tangles of barbed wire like whiskers on an old man. Carmody had had experience with barbed wire before, but still he cut the palm of his left hand in two places while swinging in a humped, acrobatic position around the frame. The sharp sting of the cuts added fuel to the already white heat of his anger.

Moving quickly now, he made his way across the yard, made ghostly by a faint shine from the half-moon overhead. The gondolas—long, slender, flat-bottomed, with tapered and upswept prow and stern—were laid out in rows, on davits, in stacks of two and three; they camouflaged his run to the far corner of the darkened wood-and-brick building.

Jalousied shutters were lowered tightly across a high, double-doored entrance, and there were no fronting windows. Carmody edged around the corner and along the side wall. An elongated window halfway down looked in on a solid screen of blackness—another dead end.

Carmody paused, peering toward the back. A high wall formed the rear boundary of the *squero* but it was set several feet beyond the building, forming a narrow alley the width of it. He decided to make a complete circle of the structure before abandoning the grounds.

The rear passageway was cluttered with refuse. He picked his way carefully through it, looking for a window. Two-thirds of the width, he found one with louvered shutters closed across it. He went to it and squinted upward through one of the canted louvers: light; movement.

The muscles in Carmody's neck went taut, and he bent lower so that he could see more of the room. It was an office of sorts. There was a desk containing a farago of miscellany and a lighted gooseneck lamp, two wooden chairs, a table overflowing charts and pamphlets, a filing cabinet with a rusted fan on top.

There was also the woman, Rita.

She stood to one side of the desk, in profile, nervously watching the closed door directly opposite the window. Her arms were folded tightly across her heavy breasts, as if she were cold, and she smoked a filter cigarette in short, agitated drags. Beneath the

olive tone of her skin, her face appeared to be very pale.

Carmody retreated, his mouth a thin white slash. He went back the way he had come and stopped before the elongated and unshuttered window which looked into the front part of the building. It was the kind that opens inward on a pair of hinges, with a simple slip catch locking it into the jamb. He went to work with the broad, flat blade of his pocketknife. After two minutes of silent, concentrated effort, he put the tips of his fingers against the streaked glass and cautiously pushed the window open.

The interior smelled of paint and linseed oil and dampness. Once inside, Carmody stood motionless on a rough concrete floor, waiting for his eyes to become acclimated to the deep blackness; pretty soon he was able to identify a lathe, a drill press, a table saw, several wood forms. The wall which would contain the office door was in heavy shadow, but he knew approximately where the opening would be and he moved stealthily in that direction.

When he was ten feet away, he could make out the lines of the door. He stepped up to it, listening. She was quiet in there, and since she had been watching the door minutes earlier, it figured she

was still watching it. He had no way of knowing whether or not she was armed; he had not seen a gun, but he had only had a limited view of the office. The door might be locked, too, but the wood was old and very dry; it would not take very long to kick it in. The element of surprise was all in his favor.

Carmody touched his left hand to the knob. Then, when he was ready, he twisted it hard to the right, moving his body forward. The door, unlocked, opened under his hand and he hit it with his left shoulder, bursting it wide, and went in very fast with the Beretta up and his body dipped into a fighter's crouch.

Rita screamed.

She stumbled backward, one hand going to her mouth, and her eyes were like buttons threatening to pop from too much pressure. Carmody reached her in three long strides, caught her dark hair in his free hand, spun her around and sat her down hard in one of the chairs. Immediately, he knelt in front of her and put the muzzle of the Beretta against her cheek, his tightly angry face less than six inches from hers.

He could see that she wanted to scream again, but there was no voice left in her. Her eyes began to roll up in their sockets. Car-

mody slapped her twice and her vision abruptly refocused, and she was out of the faint before she had really gone into it.

She stared at him with terrified shock. "Signor Carmody . . ."

"That's right—Carmody."

"But you . . . I thought . . ."

"I was luckier than Valconazzi," he said softly, thinly. "Have you been paid off yet, Rita? Where's the money?"

"Money? I have . . . no money. Please . . ."

"Come on, come on, you sold me out too when you sold out Valconazzi. Remember that."

"I do not understand—"

"The hell you don't understand."

"I was so afraid," she whispered. She was trembling now. "I did not wish to die. This is why I run away. I know nothing about money, please, I know nothing!"

"Are you trying to tell me you didn't set up that ambush?"

"Ambush?"

"The boat, the machine gunner."

"No! How could I? You cannot think—"

"Why did you run back to the house just before the shooting started?"

"My *cosmeticos*. I forget them."

"Sure you did."

"I tell the truth! Renzo was my



man, we were going away together, you cannot think I would see him killed!"

"Somebody saw him killed," Carmody said. "Somebody tipped Lambresca. And you and Valconazzi were the only ones beside me who knew where that hide-away was."

"No, no, no! I did not, I would not . . ."

She shook her head wildly, forgetting the gun at her cheek, and Carmody pulled the Beretta back slightly. It was momentarily silent in the office, and in that silence there was the sibilant but unmistakable sound of a footfall from the darkness at the front of the building. The hackles rose on the back of Carmody's neck, and out of the corner of his eye he could see the vague form of a man just outside the pool of light shining out through the open doorway. There was something large and bulky held in both the man's hands, across the front of his body.

Carmody levered up in one fluid motion and threw himself to one side, pushing Rita and the chair over backward. She screamed again, thin and piercing, but it was a cry of fear rather than pain—a cry that was lost almost instantly in the stuttering roar of the Thompson gun. One of

the sprayed bullets ripped the gooseneck lamp off the desk top and flung it down; the light went out and the office was plunged into total darkness, save for the bright flashes from the machine gun's muzzle.

Rolling frantically, Carmody managed to get the desk between himself and the doorway. He could hear the rap, rap, rap of the slugs digging into the desk, into the wall above him, as the gunner raked the enclosure with another burst. He twisted his body into the kneehole, lying flat, and he could see, then, the muzzle flashes of the Thompson gun.

He steadied the Beretta on his left forearm and emptied most of the clip at a spot six inches above the bursts.

There was a half-strangled Italian oath, and abruptly the automatic weapon became silent; a moment later the metallic clatter of the machine gun on concrete and the sound of a heavily falling body reached Carmody's ears. He remained motionless for several pulse beats, but the only thing auditory in the heavy darkness was Rita's soft whimpering somewhere across the office.

Carmody crawled out of the kneehole, got to his feet, and moved at an angle to the door. There was a pencil flash in his

trouser pocket, one he had taken from his suitcase after the unwanted swim in Rio San Spirito. He got it out and held it up toward the spot where he had heard the man fall, touching the button. A thin beam came on and he could see him out there, lying crumpled at the foot of the drill press with the machine gun on the floor two yards behind him.

For the first time, Carmody allowed his knotted muscles to relax. He swung the light back inside and shone it on Rita momentarily; she blinked against its glare, turning her face into her hands, but he could see that she was unhurt. He went out into the work area and turned the gunner over with the toe of one shoe and put the light on his face.

It was Della Robbia.

Blood welled from two holes high on his chest, but he was still alive and breathing raggedly. His eyes were squeezed shut in pain. Carmody swore softly and fought down a fresh surge of fury. He was not as surprised as he might have been—he had begun to believe Rita's protestations of innocence in the office prior to the shooting—but that did not make the treachery of a man he had trusted any easier to take. Della Robbia, sure, it figured. A lot of things began to figure now.

A light went on behind him, in the office; Rita had found another lamp somewhere. She stood looking out at him for a moment, and then started forward, her movements weak-kneed and jerky. She stopped several paces away, staring down. "It is Della Robbia," she said incredulously.

"Yeah."

"He tried to kill us?"

"Twice," Carmody said.

"I do not understand . . ."

"It's simple enough. He's the one who ambushed us on San Spirito tonight—not Lambresca. Lambresca had nothing to do with any of this; he was just a convenient scapegoat for all concerned."

"But why? Why would he do this?"

"For the money—the same reason I thought you'd sold out Valconazzi. He didn't know how much there would be, but he did know that it would be plenty."

She shook her head in a child-like way.

Carmody said, "Della Robbia got you to come here tonight, didn't he?"

A convulsive nod answered him.

"You contacted him after you left San Spirito?"

"Yes. I went to his home. I thought you and Renzo were . . . dead. I had nowhere else to go."

"And then he sent you here."

"Yes. He gave me a key and said I was to wait in the office. He told me this was the *squero* of a friend."

"What were you supposed to wait for?"

"For him to come. He promised to help me leave Venezia."

Carmody moved his head slowly up and down. The pattern was almost complete now. If Della Robbia had been able to accomplish it, he would have got Carmody alone after that first telephone call—he must have just arrived home from San Spirito when the call came—and tried to kill him then. But Carmody had talked fast and angrily, not revealing his whereabouts, and Della Robbia had been afraid to force the issue; there had been nothing he could do except to sweat and wait for the next call and hope that Carmody learned nothing in the meantime. Then Rita had shown up on his doorstep: fate playing in his corner, giving him a golden second chance—or so he'd have thought. He sent the girl here to the *squero*, waited for Carmody to ring up again, and made sure then that he would come too by fabricating the story about Rita's uncle. Della Robbia would have left immediately afterward and come straight here, arriving before

Carmody or at least in time to see him enter the grounds; and then he had used a second key to come in silently with the machine gun in hand . . .

On the floor Della Robbia made a choking sound, and Carmody looked down at him. The eyes were open now, and the lips worked soundlessly, groping for words. When he finally found them, they were surprisingly clear. "You are a cat, Signor Carmody, a cat with many lives. I should have killed you twice tonight. I am most . . . sorry I did not." He made a sound that was both a laugh and a liquid cough. "I would do it all again, do you know this? For the fortune Valconazzi carried, I would gladly do it all again."

"Yes?" Carmody said tonelessly. "Well, all right, how did you find out where the hideaway was? Valconazzi didn't tell you and I didn't tell you. The launch wasn't followed tonight, I made sure of that—and when I went out to San Spirito three days ago, I made sure I wasn't followed then, either."

Della Robbia coughed again, and it was very close to being a death rattle; he did not have much more time. He said, "A clever means, Signor. The launch . . . was equipped with a short-

wave radio. I instructed the driver to open the microphone just before he . . . picked you up, so that when you told him where . . . you would go, I could hear your instructions on my . . . own boat's radio. I did not tell him . . . the reason for this, but he had to die nonetheless . . ."

A tic made the corner of Carmody's mouth twitch slightly. "Where's the money, Della Robbia?"

"My house . . . bedroom closet . . . no point in lying, you would find it . . . you are a cat, Signor . . . a cat . . ."

There were more words, but they were lost in a spasm of fluid coughing. Then, all at once, the coughing stopped and the life force was gone from Della Robbia's eyes and he lay still on the

cold concrete floor. Carmody turned away.

Rita said, "He is . . . dead?"

Carmody nodded, took the woman's arm. "Come on, it's time we got out of here."

"Where are we to go?"

"To pick up Valconazzi's money. Hell, *your* money. You've earned the right to it. All I want is the fee Valconazzi and I agreed on."

She shook her head in that childlike way again. "And then?"

"I do the job I was hired for," Carmody said. "It might take another day or two to rearrange things, but I'll find a place for us to do the waiting. It won't be too bad."

She looked at him with her large dark eyes. "No," she said, "I do not think it will be bad at all."



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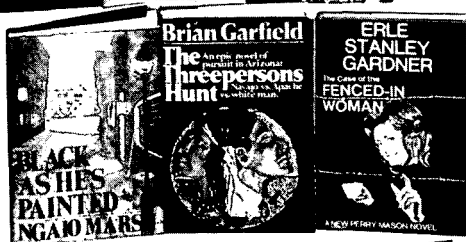
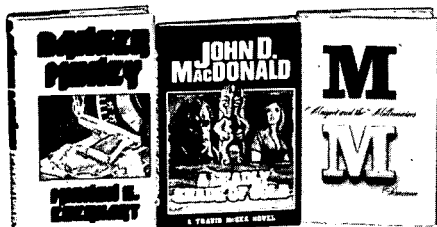
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